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SMC graduates fall '24 nursing class

COMMUNITY REPORT

DOWAGIAC — Southwestern Michigan College welcomed 14 new nurses to America's largest health care profession Wednesday, Dec. 11, with almost 4.3 million registered nurses nationwide.

With a median age of 46, the United States needs to create more than 200,000 new RN positions each year to replace retiring nurses and to meet increasing health care needs.

The fall class received associate degrees in nursing (ADN) in a pinning ceremony in the theatre of the Dale A. Lyons Building on the Dowagiac campus. The class joins the ranks of 3,199 SMC nursing graduates.

Pediatrics Professor Yolanda Roche, MSN, FNP, RN, who has been teaching at SMC for 16 years, shared her winding journey, which began in the Swiss Valley ski patrol.

"When I started college, I didn't know what I wanted to do or who I wanted to be," Roche said, "but I did not want to be a nurse. Doing lots of first aid in Jones in college, I realized I liked taking care of people. When I graduated from nursing school, I did not want to work in a hospital. I actually went to the health department. I went back to school and got my master's in community health nursing and nursing education. I came here to teach pediatrics, which exposed me to medically fragile children, and I fell in love with that and moonlighted. I got my FNP (family nurse practitioner degree).

"My husband asks me all the time if I really need to do all this stuff in nursing, and my answer is always yes because I love what I do and there is

See CLASS, Page A8

SUBMITTED | LEADER PUBLICATIONS

Southwestern Michigan College graduated 14 new nurses to America's largest health care profession Wednesday, Dec. 11.

Notre Dame awarded funding to connect tutors with evidence-based practices

COMMUNITY REPORT

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — The University of Notre Dame has received a $640,108 grant from AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism. This funding, provided through the Volunteer Generation Fund (VGF), is part of a total award of $1,001,812, with 63.895 percent financed by federal sources and 36.105 percent by nongovernmental sources. The grant will support the capacity-building efforts of Tutor-ND, Notre Dame's learning design hub that connects tutors with cognitive science and evidence-based tutoring practices.

Through this grant, Tutor-ND will collaborate with schools and community organizations to recruit, train and support 500 volunteers who will serve preK-8 students from diverse backgrounds. These volunteers will work in the greater South Bend region and in schools and after-school programs across the country, including those partnered with the Alliance for Catholic Education.

This marks Notre Dame's second year of funding from AmeriCorps VGF. Last year, 570 skilled volunteers served 25,782 hours across 25 community organizations, delivering educational services valued at nearly $2 million.

AmeriCorps provides support to community organizations to help them to alleviate poverty, expand capacity in organizations and build economic opportunity through community-driven efforts across the country. Volunteer Generation Fund grants are used to strengthen community-based entities' ability to recruit, manage and support skilled volunteers. At a time of social need, when Americans of all ages are looking for ways to give back, AmeriCorps seeks to fund effective approaches that strengthen the capacity and impact of volunteers and invest in innovative volunteer management practices.

"This new funding allows us to support volunteer tutors through learning design teams," said Michelle Luna, assistant research professor and managing director of Tutor-ND. "These teams start with evidence-based programs and practices and draw on the expertise of teachers, principals, cognitive scientists, clinical psychologists and teacher educators to continuously improve tutoring. It's a triple win: expanding access to high-impact tutoring, making scientific discoveries that enhance the quality of the tutoring programs, and addressing workforce readiness by providing apprenticeships for future leaders in education and science."

Kati Macaluso, director of

See TUTORS, Page A8

NILES TOWNSHIP BIG LOTS TO CLOSE

By MAXWELL HARDEN
max.harden@leaderpub.com

NILES TOWNSHIP — The bankruptcy of Big Lots, Inc. is prompting the closure of stores across the country and southwest Michigan is no exception.

The Niles Township Big Lots, 1907 S. 11th St., has begun its "going out of business" sale after the company announced it is preparing to close its remaining locations after a sale to save the bankrupt retailer fell through.

In a Thursday, Dec. 19 statement, the company announced it "does not anticipate completing" the sale of its assets to private equity firm Nexus Capital Management, a deal that was originally announced in September. However, the company is exploring other options to save the company, including negotiating with Nexus or another buyer, with the aim of completing a sale by early January.

"We all have worked extremely hard and have taken every step to complete a going concern sale," said Big Lots CEO Bruce Thorn in a press release. "While we remain hopeful that we can close an alternative going concern transaction, in order to protect the value of the Big Lots estate, we have made the difficult decision to begin the (going out of business) process."

Big Lots named several economic factors for its bankruptcy, including high inflation and interest rates that led customers to change their purchasing behavior. The company has been closing hundreds of stores since the beginning of the year. At its peak, Big Lots had more than 1,400 locations across the country.

MAXWELL HARDEN | LEADER PUBLICATIONS

6 54708 09550 1

Cassopolis native named Fifth District Trooper of the Year

By MAXWELL HARDEN
max.harden@leaderpub.com

PAW PAW — The Michigan State Police Fifth District has selected its 2024 Trooper of the Year.

MSP Trooper Oliver Fiala has been recognized for his outstanding service at the Paw Paw post this year, the agency recently announced. Fellow officers and dispatchers selected Fiallla for the award, which recognizes the MSP trooper or sergeant who symbolizes outstanding professional ethics, dedication to duty and a concern for giving back to their community.

Fiala, a Cassopolis native and military veteran, serves the community both as a MSP trooper and as the Assistant Fire Chief for the Central Cass Fire Department.

When he's not on patrol, Fiala is operating Schilling's Auto Wash, a

See TROOPER, Page A8

SUBMITTED | LEADER PUBLICATIONS

Oliver Fiala (center) was recognized as the Michigan State Police Fifth District's 2024 Trooper of the Year during a ceremony earlier this month.

OBITUARIES

Ruea Williams
Shirley Stevenson
Leslie Selent
Beverly Plew
Emily Whitten
George Stanley Hatter
Kathleen Baker

A6

FRANKLY

TIPS, QUIPS, AND BLIPS

"A green Christmas just isn't the same unless you are in Miami."

A2

Notre Dame downs Indiana 27-17 in CFP opener B1

FRANKLY

TIPS, QUIPS, AND BLIPS

What is Frankly? It is where readers sound off on issues of the day. Have a tip, quip or blip? Call Frankly at (269) 687-7702 or email rich.cains@leaderpub.com

The intersection of Lincoln Ave and Main Street in Niles needs a four-way stop. Only cars heading west have the right of way. They do not need to stop. Drivers get confused. Please let us have a four-way stop there.

Gaetz was chosen by Trump to be the Attorney General... you mean there was no background check on this guy?

A member of Congress is "missing" for six months. Come to find out she has been living in an assisted living facility and receiving dementia care. The GOP leadership was unaware of this? Are you kidding me?

Don't let this wonderful holiday slip by without offering your help to those who need it.

I already miss Shelton's. What's next? I hope they open another store.

The 51 and 12 intersection is what we waited a year for? What a pile of garbage? It is far more dangerous now.

Support your local high school teams. Catch an indoor game and support the students, teachers and the community.

Grandma, please be sure to wear reflective clothing on Christmas Eve.....

A green Christmas just isn't the same unless you are in Miami.

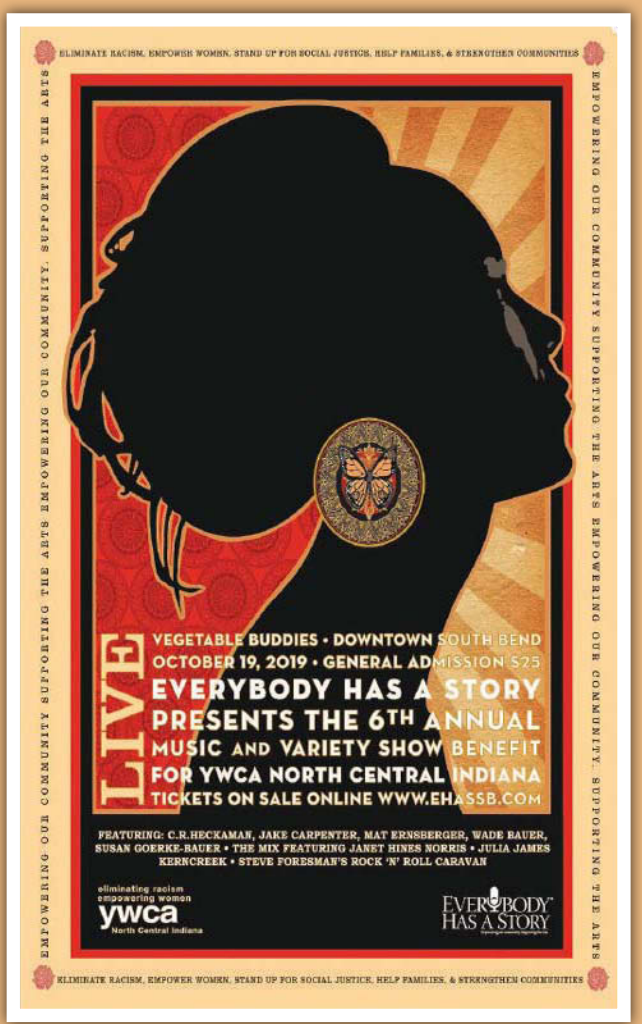
Go Lions! Way to dismantle da Bears. This is our season, so get excited if you have been living under a rock.

Hunter Ice Festival is just around the corner. It is so much fun.

I have officially filed an extension on my 2024 New Year's resolutions. I should hear back around July.

WEATHER

SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY
50% Chance of Rain	50% Chance of Rain	Mostly Cloudy	60% Chance of Rain	30% Chance Snow Showers	40% Chance of Snow
52° 42°	45° 38°	45° 39°	42° 31°	33° 26°	31° 25°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NILES ARTIST'S WORK
SELECTED FOR NATIONAL EXHIBITION

COMMUNITY REPORT

"The National Poster Show features over thirty posters designed by graphic artists from across the country."

NILES — Graphic designer and illustrator Steve Sult of Niles has announced that two of his entries have been selected for the 2025 Southern Miss National Juried Poster Show.

The Museum of Art in The University of Southern Mississippi's School of Performing and Visual Arts will open its National Poster Show exhibition from Jan. 26 through Feb. 24 on the Hattiesburg campus.

The national juried exhibition showcases posters by graphic artists across the U.S., featuring juror Michael Borosky, distinguished USM alum and co-founder of Eleven Inc. Borosky's celebrated career includes collaborations with iconic brands like Apple, Google, and Disney.

The National Poster Show features over thirty posters designed by graphic artists from across the country. The jury process was based purely on artistic and design excellence and the works selected range from traditional posters and illustrations to more experimental works.

Sult creates his art in Southwestern Michigan from his studio in Niles. He opened his doors in 2003 as Sult Mine Creative Group and gained a national and international reputation as a creative director, art director, and illustrating designer, developing new product introductions – successfully contributing to over seventy established and emerging client organizations in diverse industries in the US, South America, China, and Europe.

Today, Sult has refined this style created early in his career. His work combines elements of WPA's poster campaigns in the 1930s, pop art, Russian Constructivists art, and decorative art all being applied to poster art. It's like sitting on the fence between graphic design and illustration, blurring the boundary between traditional and commercial art through type and image via fine art prints, apparel, home products, and posters in public spaces.

IMAGES BY STEVE SULT

LEFT: Steve Sult's "YWCA/Everybody Has a Story" concert benefit poster from 2019 features Sult's art style which is highly influenced by DIY movements, as well as the visual design of Eastern European propaganda posters. Sult's art style is distinguished by the use of a limited color palette of black, red, and white digitally simulating screen printing, stenciling, and collage processes. **RIGHT:** Steve Sult's "Ed Lloyd Black Jacket Golf and Dinner Poster." Sult designed the poster using subtle color combinations and classic lettering, which lend high style to the event. In both the art elements and typography, readability is the focus.

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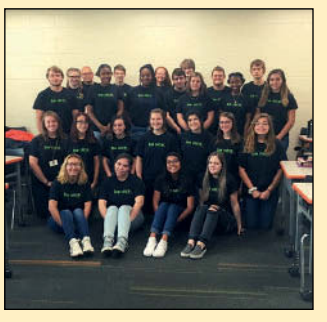

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Handmade gift pays tribute to Cass County Historic Courthouse

COMMUNITY REPORT

CASS COUNTY — On the first floor of the Cass County Historic Courthouse, a large American flag pays tribute not only to the U.S., but the County and building where it resides.

At first glance, the mixed-media piece appears to be a typical American flag — 13 stripes and 50 stars within a wood frame. On deeper inspection, however, viewers will see the iconic details within the red, white and blue represent more than our country's heritage; they pay homage to multiple eras of Cass County's most iconic structure.

At the final Cass County Board of Commissioners meeting of 2024, ELITE Companies, the general contractor that led the renovation of the historic courthouse, presented the County with the gift of a handmade American flag pieced together using artifacts saved from the building. ELITE Superintendent Jeff Copenhafer, who took the lead on crafting the piece, shared his inspiration for the project with commissioners during their meeting Thursday.

"This is a token of our appreciation for letting us be the facilitators of your renovation," he said.

Copenhafer said the white stripes that line the flag were made using an old hose from a fire suppression system installed in the 1970s.

"The frame itself is made from the balusters — the handrail of the old courthouse," he said.

Senior Project Manager Jack Whitman reflected on the renovation, which was completed in October of this year.

"From the onset, there was such an overwhelming history

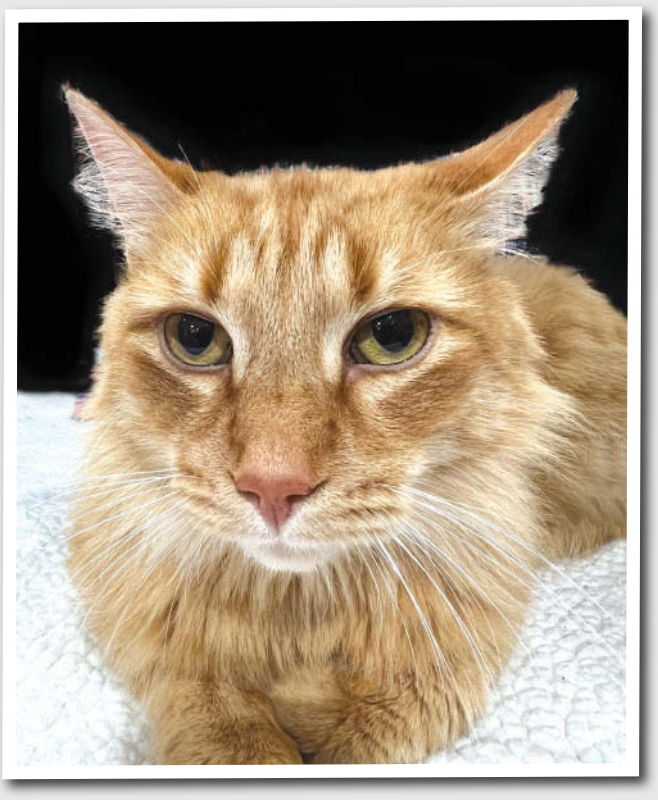
See GIFT, Page A8

SUBMITTED | LEADER PUBLICATIONS

Commissioner Ryan Laylin awarded Jeff Copenhafer, ELITE Companies superintendent, and Jack Whitman, ELITE Companies senior project manager, with a Cass County honor coin Monday, as thanks for the American flag art he created using restored pieces from the Historic Courthouse. Pictured left to right are Laylin, Commissioner Roseann Marchetti, Copenhafer and Whitman.

PET OF THE WEEK

Meet **Tangerine**, a sweet adult cat with a heart as warm as his name. His soft medium-length coat and gentle purrs make him an irresistible companion. The perfect mix of play and affection, Tangerine is always ready for a game or cozy snuggle session. In a loving forever home, Tangerine can share endless charm and bring joy to his family. He isnNeutered, current vaccines and FeLV-FIV negative. Contact Paws of Hope at adoptions@pawsofhope.org.



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2 APY = Annual Percentage Yield, 0.00% APY. $250 paid when new or existing member without a current checking account opens a personal checking account with a minimum opening deposit of $25, sets up qualifying direct deposit(s) totaling $500 or more and conducts 8+ debit card transactions all within 60 days of account opening. A qualifying direct deposit is defined as one from a recurring paycheck, pension, or government benefits (such as social security) payments only. Non-payroll related ACH, person-to-person payments and transfers from other financial institutions or other Honor CU accounts do not qualify. Bonus will be paid within 30 days of minimum requirements being met. New account must remain open and maintain a positive balance for at least 90 days. If criteria is not met, $250 bonus will be withdrawn from account. New members must open account at honorcu.com/bonus/ or a local member center location. Existing members must open new checking account at member center location, phone, or video appointment, and specifically mention the $250 offer at time of opening. Existing members that have closed a checking account at Honor in last five years, not eligible. Offer subject to change without notice. The value of the reward may be reported on the appropriate Internal Revenue Service (IRS) forms and may be considered taxable income to you. Please consult your tax advisor regarding your specific situation. Insured By NCUA.

Opinion

The "X"mas Files

By RICH CAINS
Publisher, Leader Publications

As we approach, linger and eventually wave goodbye to the holiday season each year, most of us have stories that stir up the holiday emotions in us. My childhood Christmases were always fun, or at least that's how I remember them and now as a husband and father I'm blessed with a family making new wonderful memories each year. Loving this time of year is certainly not out of the ordinary, but neither are the struggles many folks face during these holidays. Some of the struggles are obvious in the faces of the homeless or those who have lost loved ones. I see people holding signs at an intersection hoping a few dollars find their way into a pants pocket or a few french fries into a stomach. I often wonder what happened to these people in life that brought them to this place. Other people walk among us at work or even at home and fear the holidays without ever showing an outward sign of the stress and pain the holidays bring them.

Cains

I want to share with you a true story regarding something that happened to me nearly 20 years ago in December and to this very day I cannot explain the how and why of it. It sounds a little crazy and as you read you will see why.

I was working for a newspaper with its office located in Merrillville, Indiana. I was sitting at my desk when I received a phone call from our receptionist, Maribel. She told me there was a gentleman at the front desk requesting to speak to someone in management. I came forward and greeted the man. He began telling me how bad things were "out there" and that employment was nowhere to be found and he had children to feed. He asked me "what are you going to do about it?" I am quite certain the blank look on my face was not an indication of a miracle about to happen. He went on about not having Christmas presents for his children or food to feed them. He requested I write a story about helping those less fortunate. Being in the advertising department I had no control over editorial and knew this story was not happening any time soon. It was almost noon and I typically left the office for a quick lunch. I asked him if he drove his car to our office and he said he did not have one. I asked him where he lived, and he said a few miles away. After a moment of contemplation, self-reflection and a silent prayer for my safety, I asked him to hop in my car. We drove about a mile down the road to a large grocery store. Along the way he did not say much, even after I told him I was going to "help him out a little." I parked the car, and we walked across a long parking lot side by side. Upon reaching the automatic glass door that was now open I gestured to him to go first and walk in front of me, however, he insisted I go first. It took me a few seconds to walk through and by the time I turned around, the man was gone. I quickly backtracked through the entrance and saw no one. Mind you, the entire front of the building was glass and there was nowhere to run or hide without me seeing him. My heart was pounding, and I could not make sense of the situation. Sound a bit crazy? You bet. Was this a magician or an angel? When I made it back to my office, I cautiously and carefully confirmed with Maribel that I did, in fact, leave with a gentleman. So, 20 years later I find myself writing that story about helping the less fortunate.

A dollar may not seem like much, but to someone who has nothing, it's everything. I would encourage everyone to help fill those red kettles this time of year or help support the many other wonderful organizations providing acts of kindness in our community and abroad. Finding people to give a worthwhile donation to is not difficult. Sometimes they find you.

New year, new you?

We have now had two holidays full of food, family, fun, and of course, gifts from Santa. We are nearing the end of the year and looking ahead. We look at what our year has held and what the new year will hold. Like most people, I am reflecting on what my life has been like over the past year and considering what I might want to change or continue in the new year. I start trying to think of my flaws, my mistakes, and things I could have just done better. However, I often forget to think about these things not as things I could have prevented, but as things to learn from. How can I take these lessons of 2024 and incorporate them into my new year? It is always good to be kind to yourself, as well as others. We often forget to give kindness and grace to ourselves and not treat ourselves so harshly. We say things like "I am so dumb" or "I'm stupid." That is not true, ever. We may not know how to do something, or we may mess up the first time, but that doesn't make us dumb – it makes us human, as we are always learning. Please give yourself grace this coming year and be open to positive self-affirmations. When you feel discouraged or inadequate, simply say something like, "I am doing my best, and that is all that matters. I am learning." Remember to love yourself—be kind to yourself and give yourself grace. I challenge you all in this new year to say one positive thing about yourself every morning while looking in the mirror. It doesn't have to be eloquent or well thought out—you can simply say something like, "I am beautiful (handsome). I am good. I am learning, and I am always trying my best." When I think of positive affirmations, a scene from the movie "The Help" always comes to mind. It's one of the scenes where Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis) says to the child she cares for:

Turnock

"You is kind,
You is smart,
You is important."

Peace and love to you all.

Joshua Turnock is a Niles graduate and a valued member of Leader Publications' Design Team.

NEWS

IUSB receives Valinhos Foundation grant to help with mental health services

COMMUNITY REPORT

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — The IU South Bend Student Counseling Center has been awarded a three-year transformative grant through the locally-based Valinhos Foundation. The grant will allow the campus to begin implementing an expanded mental health framework to improve support for the campus community of more than 4,600 students.

"We are so excited about the amazing opportunities and resources that will be provided for students at IU South Bend through this generous grant," said Vice Chancellor for Student Engagement Kory Vitangeli. "We are immensely grateful for the opportunity to work with the Valinhos Foundation and look forward to an incredible partnership."

The funding will establish a stepped-care approach for access to mental health care, community resources, and support. The services will be offered to students experiencing emotional and financial distress or lack of family and community support. This Titan Stepped Care approach will include:

• Consultation and mentorship with The Jed Foundation to gain recognition as a JED campus. JED works to protect emotional health and prevent suicide in teens and young adults.

• Creation of paid mental health and wellness focused student internship opportunities in various areas of campus.

• Establishment of a Titan Care Manager role within the Student Engagement Division that connects students with campus and community resources.

• Collaboration with the IU president's Mental Health Task Force, IU students, faculty, staff, and community partners to promote mental health first aid awareness and education.

"This grant is an opportunity to support IU South Bend's efforts to address the mental health and well-being of the student community," said Julie Veldman Harris, executive director of the Valinhos Foundation. "This grant fits with the goals of our foundation and will enable IU South Bend to prevent mental health challenges, increase the availability of care, and leverage evidence-based mental health care."

The Valinhos Foundation aims to make a difference in Indiana by funding mental health initiatives focused on kids, young adults, and families.

Indiana University South Bend is the premier comprehensive public university dedicated to serving the needs of North Central Indiana and beyond. As a regional campus of Indiana University, IU South Bend provides a diverse population the opportunity to affordably earn a prestigious IU degree.

Niles Daily Star

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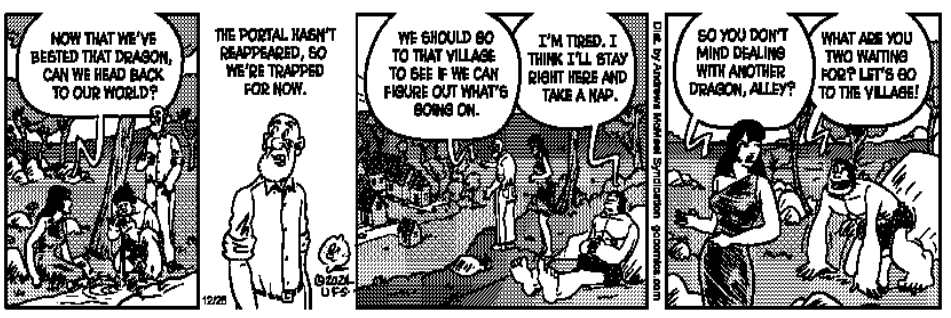
COMICS & PUZZLES

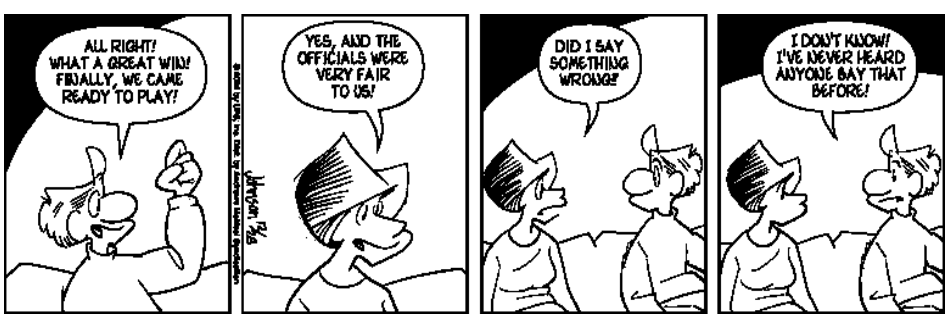
ADAM

HOW'S THE WRITING?
MEH. IT'S TOUGH BETWEEN CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S.
MY BRAIN JUST DOESN'T WORK RIGHT BETWEEN THESE TWO HOLIDAYS.
I'VE ACCEPTED THAT IT'S JUST "HOLIDAY BRAIN."
OR IT COULD BE "I ATE SEVEN POUNDS OF COOKIES YESTERDAY" BRAIN.
THAT WOULD EXPLAIN THE HOURLY NAPS.

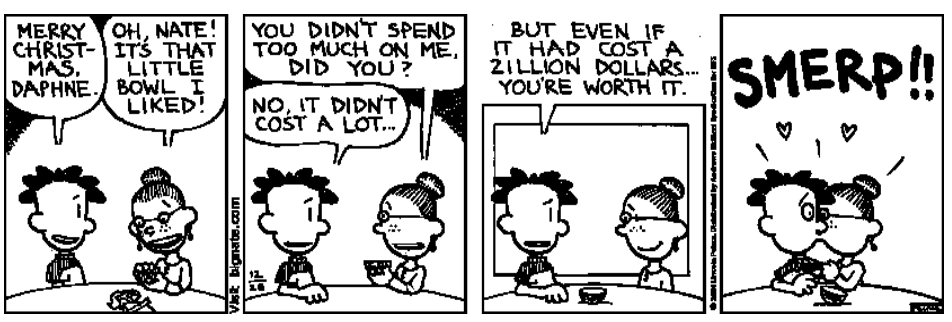
ALLEY OOP


NOW THAT WE'VE BESTED THAT DRAGON, CAN WE HEAD BACK TO OUR WORLD?
THE PORTAL HASN'T REAPPEARED, SO WE'RE TRAPPED FOR NOW.
WE SHOULD GO TO THAT VILLAGE TO SEE IF WE CAN FIGURE OUT WHAT'S GOING ON.
I'M TIRED. I THINK I'LL STAY RIGHT HERE AND TAKE A NAP.
SO YOU DON'T MIND DEALING WITH ANOTHER DRAGON, ALLEY?
WHAT ARE YOU TWO WAITING FOR? LET'S GO TO THE VILLAGE!

ARLO & JANIS


ALL RIGHT! WHAT A GREAT WIN! FINALLY, WE CAME READY TO PLAY!
YES, AND THE OFFICIALS WERE VERY FAIR TO US!
DID I SAY SOMETHING WRONG?
I DON'T KNOW! I'VE NEVER HEARD ANYONE SAY THAT BEFORE!

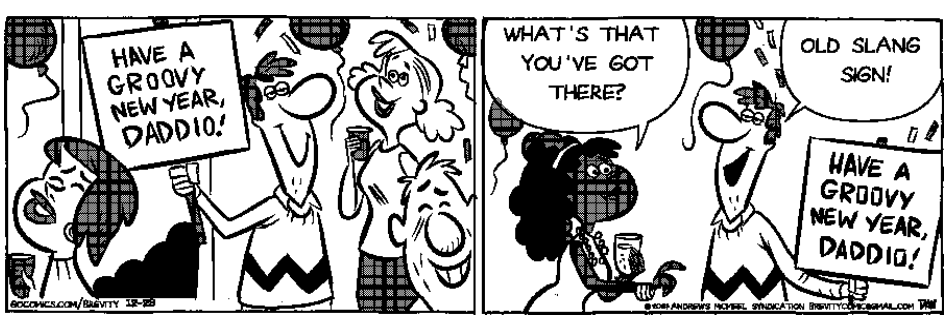
BIG NATE


MERRY CHRIST-MAS, DAPHNE.
OH, NATE! IT'S THAT LITTLE BOWL I LIKED!
YOU DIDN'T SPEND TOO MUCH ON ME, DID YOU?
NO, IT DIDN'T COST A LOT...
BUT EVEN IF IT HAD COST A ZILLION DOLLARS... YOU'RE WORTH IT.
SMERP!!

BORN LOSER

MOM SAYS YOU BOUGHT THE WRONG KIND OF CALENDAR. WHAT'S WRONG WITH IT?
YEAH, I BOUGHT A 2024 CALENDAR INSTEAD OF A 2025 ONE!
WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL—AREN'T ALL OF THE MONTHS AND THE NUMBER OF DAYS THE SAME?

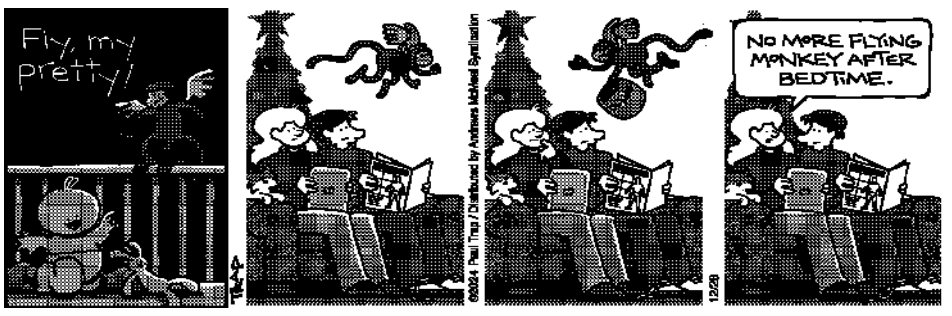
FRANK & ERNEST



GRIZZWELLS

Street Assignments for Snowplow Drivers
HERE'S A LIST OF PEOPLE WHO GOT UP EARLY AND SHOVELED OUT THEIR DRIVEWAYS. MAKE IT FAST, BEFORE THEY GET THEIR CARS OUT.

THATABABY



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- *2 D'anjou Pears*
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- *2 Orchard Apples*
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SODOKU PUZZLE

HOW TO PLAY: Each row, column and set of 3-by-3 boxes must contain the numbers 1 through 9 without repetition.

DIFFICULTY RATING: 5/5

ANSWER ON PAGE 6

				1	6		5	2
		2	7		3	6		
	6			5				9
	5							7
		4		3		5		
9							8	
6				7			9	
		5	9		2	3		
2	3		4	6				

MODERATELY CONFUSED

I'M MAKING A LIST OF RESOLUTIONS THAT I CAN FOLLOW THROUGH ON.
YOUR PAGE IS BLANK.
STAHLER 12/28
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REALITY CHECK

CROSSWORD PUZZLE

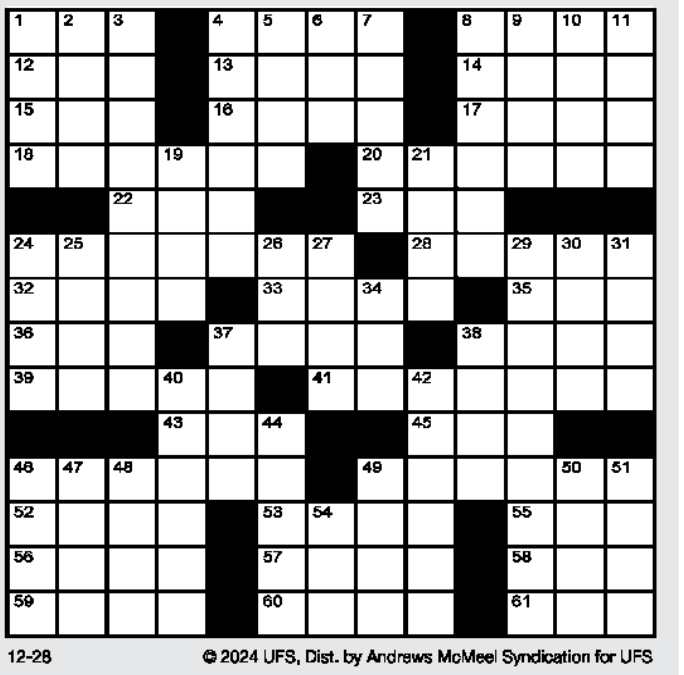
ACROSS

1 Nervous habit
4 Emporium
8 Uppermost point
12 Mil. entertainers
13 Margarine
14 Go with the —
15 Container
16 Singer — McEntire
17 Kismet
18 Crafty
20 Small hamburger
22 Nest egg letters
23 Rocky hill
24 Mutilated
28 Earthy pigment
32 Chills and fever
33 Essential
35 Ab — (from the beginning)
36 Estuary
37 Albacore
38 Earth
39 Shade
41 Joint of the hand
43 Calendar abbr.
45 Crony
46 Young cow
49 Impedes legally
52 "God's Little —"
53 Jai —
55 Big cheese
56 Where Tehran is
57 Reddish gem
58 — -friendly
59 Regretted
60 New Year's Eve word
61 Rodent

DOWN

1 Band instrument
2 Egyptian goddess
3 Unending
4 Only human
5 Toward the sheltered side
6 Yank's foe
7 Congratulatory drink
8 Assert
9 Dressed
10 Airborne speck
11 Pitcher
19 Compulsion
21 Low-down guy
24 Singer — Anthony
25 Exchange fee
26 Aussie bird
27 Submerge
29 Bibliophile (2 wds.)
30 Bad deeds
31 Part
34 Word in place names
37 Sapling
38 Sing improvised jazz
40 Insult
42 Favorable aspect
44 High-ranking officers
46 Locks
47 Beige
48 "Dies —"
49 Be entitled to
50 Type size
51 Blemish
54 "Now I — me down ..."

ANSWER ON PAGE 6



12-28

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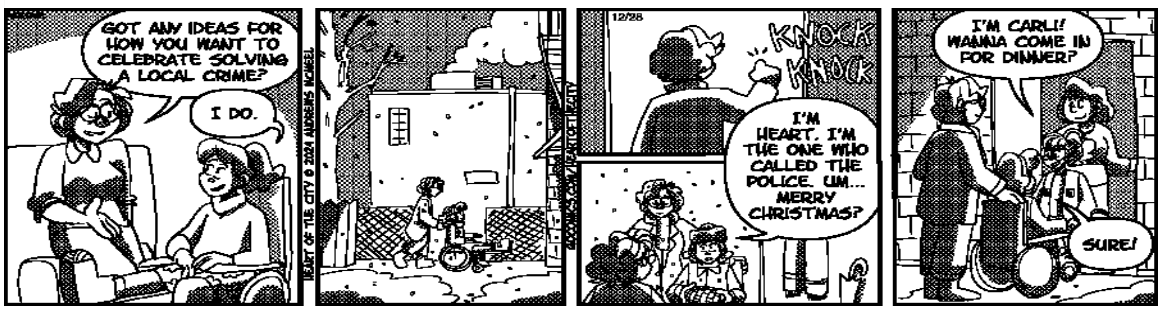
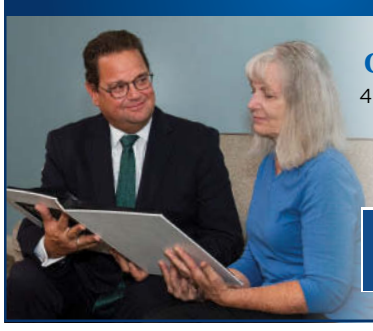
BREVITY

HEART OF THE CITY


GOT ANY IDEAS FOR HOW YOU WANT TO CELEBRATE SOLVING A LOCAL CRIME?
I DO.
KNOCK KNOCK
I'M HEART. I'M THE ONE WHO CALLED THE POLICE. UM... MERRY CHRISTMAS?
I'M CARL!! WANNA COME IN FOR DINNER?
SURE!

Celebrate a life

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Cassopolis, MI 49031
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Dowagiac, MI 49047

DEATH NOTICES

Ruea Williams, 92, of Bridgeman, passed away December 18, 2024. Funeral service will be December 23, 2024 at 11am at Chapel Hill UMC-Sodus. Bowerman Funeral Home, Eau Claire. www.Bowerman-funeral.com.

Shirley Stevenson, 89, of Cassopolis, previously of Niles passed away peacefully Saturday, December 21, 2024. Arrangments have been entrusted to Brown Funeral Home & Cremation Services.

Leslie Selent, 76, of Niles passed away peacefully in her home on Tuesday, December 17, 2024. Arrangments have been entrusted to Brown Funeral Home & Cremation Services.

Beverly Plew, 92, of Niles, passed away Saturday, December 21, 2024. Arrangements have been entrusted to Brown Funeral Home and Cremations Services, Niles, MI.

Emily Whitten, 41, of Chicago, passed away Friday, December 20, 2024. A funeral service will be held on Friday, December 27, at 2:00 P.M. at Brown Funeral Home. www.BrownFuneralHomeNiles.com

George Stanley Hatter, 83, passed away on Monday, December 23, 2024, in Dowagiac, Michigan. Arrangements have been entrusted to and are pending with Brown Funeral Home & Cremation Services.

OBITUARIES

Kathleen Baker

May 31, 1945 - December 22, 2024

Kathleen Ann Baker, 79, of Dowagiac, peacefully passed away Sunday, December 22, 2024, at Corewell Health Niles Hospital, Niles, MI, surrounded by her family.

Kathy was born on May 31, 1945, the daughter of the late Sylvester and Betty (Janes) Farrell. She married Bradley on March 7, 1981, and just celebrated 43 wonderful years together. Kathy earned a master's degree from Indiana University. She was employed by Brandywine Public Schools for 36 years, including instructing driver's education, until her retirement. Kathy never fully retired as she continued her teaching at Brandywine Schools as a substitute teacher for the next 16 years. She was proud of the many tattoos she acquired over the years. Her family and friends fondly referred to her as, "Nanny". Kathy was an animal lover, with she and her husband raising several Golden Retrievers, Klumber Spaniels, and cats, over the years.

Kathleen will be missed by her husband, Bradley "Brad" Baker, a daughter-Carrie (Nathan) Swailes; 2 granddaughters-Amelia Swailes and Natelie (Derek Reynolds) Swailes; 2 great-granddaughters-Delanie and Emrie; and 2 brothers-Patrick (Becky) Farrell and Kevin Farrell. She is preceded in death by her daughter, Shelley Werner.

Honoring Kathy's wishes, cremation has taken place and the family will celebrate her life privately. Funeral arrangements have been entrusted to Clark Chapel - Starks Family Funeral Homes, 405 Center St., Dowagiac. Please visit Kathy's personalized webpage to share a memory or leave a condolence to her family at www.clarkch.com.

Three Rivers man gets probation for meth delivery

By DEBRA HAIGHT
Leader Publications Contributor

CASSOPOLIS — Probation sentences for drug and drunk driving offenses were handed down Friday, Dec. 20 in Cass County Circuit Court.

A Three Rivers man is getting the chance to stay out of prison after being convicted of manufacture or delivery of methamphetamine.

Glen David Willis, 55, of Three Rivers, pleaded guilty to delivery/manufacture of methamphetamine as a habitual offender and was sentenced to three years probation in the Adult Treatment Court, credit for 28 days served and $2,628 in fines and costs.

Willis

The incident occurred April 27, 2023 in Jones.

Assistant Prosecutor Jason Ronning said that Willis has a chance to stay out of prison if he's successful on probation. "If he fails in the program, he will almost definitely spend a lot of time in prison and with his health concerns, it may be for the rest of his life," he said.

"He's already at high risk with his health, I don't believe going to prison will do him any good," defense attorney Robert Drake said. "He expects he would die in prison if he was sent there."

"I would like to thank everybody," Willis said. "I've had trouble beating this, it really has destroyed my life. I used to work and then I quit working. I was doing good in Adult Treatment Court before and I want to get back into it."

Cass County Circuit Court Judge Mark Herman said it's up to Willis as to whether he succeeds on probation. "You have had health concerns with your heart," he said. "You've also had six meth charges since 2008. I'm no medical doctor but a lot of your health issues stem from meth."

The judge noted that Willis has been to jail and prison before and tried other treatment programs. "It's disheartening for me to see how drugs destroy lives," he said. "You need to realize where you put yourself. If you're not serious, you are looking at a prison sentence."

"If you violate, I will send you to prison, they do have hospitals in prison," he added. "This is your last opportunity plain and simple to get your addiction under control. You can't say you don't know the consequences, you're looking at nine and a half years at a minimum. If that's not a motivation to stop, I don't know what is."

A Dowagiac man was also sentenced to probation for possession of methamphetamines.

Gagiliardo

Kyle Christopher Gagiliardo, 40, of Dowagiac, pleaded guilty to possession of meth and was sentenced to two years probation, credit for 67 days served and $2,268 in fines and costs.

The incident occurred Oct. 15 outside of Niles. Gagliardo now has five felony and 12 misdemeanor convictions.

Defense attorney Kaitlin Locke said that Gagiliardo had been clean and sober for a long period of time but relapsed and "went off the rails" after his parents died within three weeks of each other. "He has taken responsibility for his behavior right off the bad, he pleaded pretty quickly," she said.

Judge Herman told him that if he doesn't get hold of his addiction he could be suffering health problems like Willis is. "If you continue to use, you will be an old man fast," he said.

"Your parents dying may be a reason for your relapse but it's not an excuse," he said. "Would your parents want to be looking down from heaven and see you destroying your life because they died? I see positive things in your life but it doesn't seem like you have much gumption."

In two drunk driving sentences, area men were sentenced to probation.

Ryan Adam McNeely, 37, of Niles, pleaded guilty to second offense drunk driving and was sentenced to two years probation, credit for six days served and $2,605 in fines, costs and restitution.

McNeely

The incident occurred Sept. 11 in Howard Township. McNeely's blood alcohol level was .25, more than three times the legal limit. McNeely is an Army veteran and was severely injured in Afghanistan. He currently works with veterans in Berrien County.

Carlos Romero-Barrios, 48, of Elkhart, pleaded guilty to third offense drunk driving and was sentenced in a delayed sentencing to 11 months probation, credit for one day served and $2,268 in fines, costs and restitution. The charge will be reduced to a misdemeanor if he is successful on probation.

Romero-Barrios

The incident occurred Aug. 21 in Edwardsburg. His blood alcohol level was .102.

SBA offers relief to Michigan businesses hit by last winter's frost, freeze

COMMUNITY REPORT

ATLANTA, Ga. — The U.S. Small Business Administration announced today that Economic Injury Disaster Loans are available in Michigan for small businesses, small agricultural cooperatives, small businesses engaged in aquaculture, and most private nonprofit organizations with economic losses due to the frost and freeze that occurred on Jan. 15 through March 21.

The declaration includes Berrien County and the adjacent counties of Cass, and Van Buren in Michigan as well as LaPorte, and St. Joseph in Indiana.

Under this declaration, the SBA's EIDL program is available to eligible farm-related and nonfarm-related entities that suffered financial losses as a direct result of this disaster. Apart from aquaculture enterprises, SBA

See RELIEF, Page A7

CROSSWORD ANSWER
From Page 5

T	I	C		M	A	R	T		A	C	M	E
U	S	O		O	L	E	O		F	L	O	W
B	I	N		R	E	B	A		F	A	T	E
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		I	R	A			T	O	R			
M	A	N	G	L	E	D		U	M	B	E	R
A	G	U	E		M	U	S	T		O	V	O
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H	E	I	F	E	R		E	S	T	O	P	S
A	C	R	E		A	L	A	I		V	I	P
I	R	A	N		S	A	R	D		E	C	O
R	U	E	D		S	Y	N	E		R	A	T

SUDOKU ANSWER
From Page 5

3	9	7	8	1	6	4	5	2
5	4	2	7	9	3	6	1	8
8	6	1	2	5	4	7	3	9
1	5	3	6	2	8	9	4	7
7	8	4	1	3	9	5	2	6
9	2	6	5	4	7	1	8	3
6	1	8	3	7	5	2	9	4
4	7	5	9	8	2	3	6	1
2	3	9	4	6	1	8	7	5

Governor reappoints trustees Burris, Liggins to WMU board

COMMUNITY REPORT

KALAMAZOO — Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has reappointed two Western Michigan University Board of Trustees members to new eight-year terms.

Trustees Kelly K. Burris, B.S.'88, and James L. Liggins Jr. will continue serving on the board through new terms ending on Dec. 31, 2032.

Both board members were first appointed to fill vacant seats through terms ending on Dec. 31, 2024. Burris has served on the board since February 2023 and Liggins Jr. since January 2024.

"We are grateful to the governor for these reappointments. Trustees Burris and Liggins have brought great wisdom and invaluable experience to the board and to the Western Michigan University community," says WMU President Edward Montgomery. "We look forward to their continued leadership over the coming years."

Burris is the owner and founder of Burris Law, PLLC, an intellectual property law firm in Detroit. She holds multiple degrees, including a Juris Doctorate from St. Louis University; a Master of Science in materials science and engineering from Washington University; and a Bachelor of Science in aeronautical engineering from Western Michigan University. She previously was a partner at several national IP boutique firms. Burris was recently selected by her peers for inclusion in the 2025 edition of The Best Lawyers in America in the area of Patent Law for the Detroit Region, and Burris Law was named a Best Women-led Law Firm by Michigan Lawyers Weekly in 2024.

In 2021, Chambers recognized her as a "Highly Commended" honoree for pro bono work. Additionally, she is a member of the Michigan Aeronautics Commission and sits on the Board of Directors for the Detroit Athletic Club. She is also a licensed pilot with multiple ratings and flies her TBM 940 regularly for business and charitable work.

Liggins, of Kalamazoo, is senior counsel at Warner Norcross + Judd, LLP. Previously, he was a partner at Miller Canfield Paddock and Stone, PLC, and an in-house litigation associate at Consumers Energy. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in political science from the University of Michigan and a Juris Doctorate from Michigan State University College of Law.

He serves on numerous boards, including Bronson Healthcare Group, where he is the incoming board chair; the American Hospital Association Committee on Governance, where he currently serves as chair; United Way of South Central Michigan, where he previously served as chairman of the board of directors; The Harold and Grace Upjohn Foundation; the State Bar of Michigan Judicial Qualifications Committee, where he serves as co-chair; the State Bar of Michigan Board of Commissioners; Greenleaf Trust; and the State of Michigan Board of Ethics.

Appointments to the WMU Board of Trustees are subject to the advice and consent of the Michigan Senate.

For more WMU news, arts and events, visit WMU News online.

RELIEF

Continued from page A6

cannot provide disaster loans to agricultural producers, farmers, and ranchers.

Eligibility is based on the size of the applicant, type of activity and its financial resources. These working capital loans may be used to pay fixed debts, payroll, accounts payable, and other bills that could have been paid had the disaster not occurred.

"When farmers face crop losses and a disaster is declared by the Secretary of Agriculture, SBA working capital loans become a lifeline for eligible small businesses," said Francisco Sánchez, Jr., associate administrator for the Office of Disaster Recovery and Resilience at the SBA. "These loans are the backbone that helps rural communities bounce back and thrive after a disaster strikes."

The loan amount can be up to $2 million with interest rates of 4% for small businesses and 3.25% for private nonprofit organizations, with terms up to 30 years. Interest does not accrue, and payments are not due, until 12 months from the date of the first loan disbursement. The SBA sets loan amounts and terms based on each applicant's financial condition.

On Oct. 15, 2024, it was announced that funds for the Disaster Loan Program have been fully expended. While no new loans can be issued until Congress appropriates additional funding, we remain committed to supporting disaster survivors. Applications will continue to be accepted and processed to ensure individuals and businesses are prepared to receive assistance once funding becomes available.

Applicants are encouraged to submit their loan applications promptly for review in anticipation of future funding.

To apply online and receive additional disaster assistance information visit sba.gov/disaster.

Applicants may also call SBA's Customer Service Center at (800) 659-2955 or email disastercustomerservice@sba.gov for more information on SBA disaster assistance. For people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech disability, please dial 7-1-1 to access telecommunications relay services.

Submit completed loan applications to the SBA no later than Aug. 11, 2025.

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GIFT

Continued from page A3

we needed to recognize and respect," he said. "The structure itself is a testament to building practices that have now become cost prohibitive. People don't construct limestone buildings anymore!"

In early 2023, ELITE had a shipping container delivered to the site that was dedicated to storing and preserving artifacts, materials and furniture from the historic building. Although the 125-year-old building experienced significant modernizations during renovation, County leaders and project partners felt it was important to preserve as many aspects as possible. On the third floor, three chairs from the original courtroom have been restored. Outside the Treasurer's office, guests can view a restored railing and ornate sconce alongside old photos. Beams of exposed brick stand next to a new staircase, and original tin ceilings have been restored in the public vault in the Clerk/Register's office.

"It was hard not to be in awe of this building," Whitman said. "The ELITE superintendents and I knew we had to preserve something to gift back to the residents of Cass County. … [Copenhafer's] 25-plus years of carpentry experience drove it home to the beautiful art that now hangs on the first floor near the Veterans Affairs office."

ELITE President and CEO Jim Feltch is proud of his team's efforts, which are an example of the company's dedication to serving the communities in which they work.

"ELITE is drawn to the nonprofit sector for many reasons; perhaps the primary reason is the dedicated and passionate people who pride themselves on serving in the community," he said. "As a company, our culture represents purpose for our clients and to one another. It is purpose that fuels our efforts and determination to set ourselves apart in a complex industry. There is nothing better than a completed project that was done safely and brings positivity to the clients and communities we serve."

Monday morning, Cass County District 1 Commissioner Ryan Laylin, who served on the work group that guided the project, awarded challenge coins to Whitman and Copenhafer as thanks for the initiative and hard work on both the flag and the renovation project.

"It shows the 'test of time,'" Laylin said. "The last major renovation was in the mid-seventies. Now some of the pieces will live on through this piece. This building has been discussed for over 20 years, deciding the use or future purpose. The right players were finally in the game to get it done and it is magnificent. I'd like to thank ELITE Companies, PlazaCorp and Intersect Studio for their dedication and due diligence regarding our historic courthouse."

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CLASS

Continued from page A1

so much to do in nursing. My path leading here started with skiing. Take your path. You won't know what you're passionate about until you get there."

Two sayings hang in her office — 'The expert in everything was once a beginner' and 'I must do the things I think I cannot do'.

"These were my mantras in school," Roche said. "That intimidating cardio-thoracic surgeon who makes you feel like an idiot when you're trying to talk to them, they had a first day at school. Every expert did. They all had to learn things the first time and got to where they are because they did the work and put the time in, like you guys are going to do."

"I have found," Roche said, "that the more I learn, the more I realize I know nothing, and I have taught myself to not be afraid of that. Nurses are lifelong learners. Accept that you don't know everything and give yourself some grace. Don't be hard on yourself. Ask for help. Learn new things. As you become experienced, beginners will be experts, too, someday, if you give them support and contribute positively to their journeys."

SUBMITTED | LEADER PUBLICATIONS

Shayla Shears was announced as the peer-selected recipient of the Florence Nightingale Award.

In his welcome, President Dr. Joe Odenwald introduced Vice Chairman Tracy Hertsel and Trustees Becky Moore and Dr. Elaine Foster, former nursing dean.

"Both my grandmothers were nurses and they nurtured me," Odenwald said. "My maternal grandmother was an RN. My paternal grandmother was an LPN."

He recently found the former's September 1950 nursing diploma. "She's 97 and served as a public health nurse. Fifty years as a registered nurse, 1950-2000."

"You're part of a great tradition," he said. "Everybody needs a nurse, whether coming into this world or going out. Someday you'll be taking care of me. We look forward to watching your careers develop."

Faculty in attendance included Chair Rona Goodrich, MSN, RN; Stacey Dwyer, MSN, RN; Haley Smith, MSN, RN; Hazel Lim, MSN, RN; Catherine Chandler, MSN, RN; Michelle Mercado. BSN, RN; Molly Marquart, BSN, RN; and Erika Ervin, nursing success coach.

Graduates include: Julia Amor of Niles, McKayla Brooks of Three Rivers, Madelyn Buck of Paw Paw, Nathan Damm of Niles, Rylie Gaideski of Dowagiac, Matthew Imperio of Cassopolis, Hailie McCarty of South Bend, Kelsey McClure of Elkhart, Alexis McDonnell of Dowagiac, Makayla Shaw of Edwardsburg, Shayla Shears of Edwardsburg, Robert Spansail of Dowagiac, Caitlin Trovatore of Edwardsburg and Travis Yates of Decatur.

Shayla Shears was announced as the Lamp of Knowledge recipient by Nursing Department Chair Rona Goodrich in recognition of the peer-selected Florence Nightingale Award embodying selflessness, compassion, thoughtfulness, team play, dependability, generosity and humility.

TROOPER

Continued from page A1

Dowagiac business he took over earlier this year following the passing of previous owner and family friend William Schilling.

Other award recipients included:

Sgt. Cody Little, Paw Paw - Excellence in Supervision Award

Retired D/Sgt. Aaron Steensma - Blue Diamond Award

F/Lt. Keith Disselkoen - Blue Goose Award, on behalf of the Wayland Post.

TUTORS

Continued from page A1

the ACE Teaching Fellows Master of Education program at Notre Dame, emphasized the benefits for aspiring teachers. "We're blessed to have a program that brings volunteer tutors, many of whom are aspiring teachers, face-to-face with students, allowing them to immerse themselves in the relationship building, evidence-based practices, planning and preparation vital for fostering growth in literacy and math."

One notable example of the impact of AmeriCorps VGF funding is Darden Elementary, a Title I school in South Bend. Over the past three years, Darden has focused on ensuring its students achieve reading proficiency by third grade, aligning with Indiana's new reading law. By implementing several improvement strategies, including high-impact tutoring, Darden's third-graders achieved a 76.2 percent pass rate on IREAD-3 last year, up from 62.4 percent in 2022, significantly outpacing both the district's and the state's average growth during this period.

Darden's principal, Patty Karban, expressed her gratitude: "I love South Bend students and know they are our future. Thanks to the support provided by Notre Dame's AmeriCorps VGF grant, our students are making great gains and building bright futures. Each student has formed a lasting connection with their tutor, and many can now see themselves attending college."

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VOLLEYBALL

Kelsay named head volleyball coach at Michigan State

COMMUNITY REPORT

EAST LANSING — Former Michigan State volleyball standout Kristen Kelsay has been named the eighth head volleyball coach in program history. One of MSU's career assist leaders, Kelsay spent the last two seasons as associate head coach at Minnesota.

"I'm thrilled to announce that Kristen Kelsay is returning to East Lansing to guide the Spartan volleyball program," said Alan Haller, Michigan State Vice President & Director of Athletics. "From her time as a Spartan student-athlete to her ascension through the coaching ranks, including nine seasons as a Big Ten assistant, her journey has brought her back home and prepared her well for the task at hand.

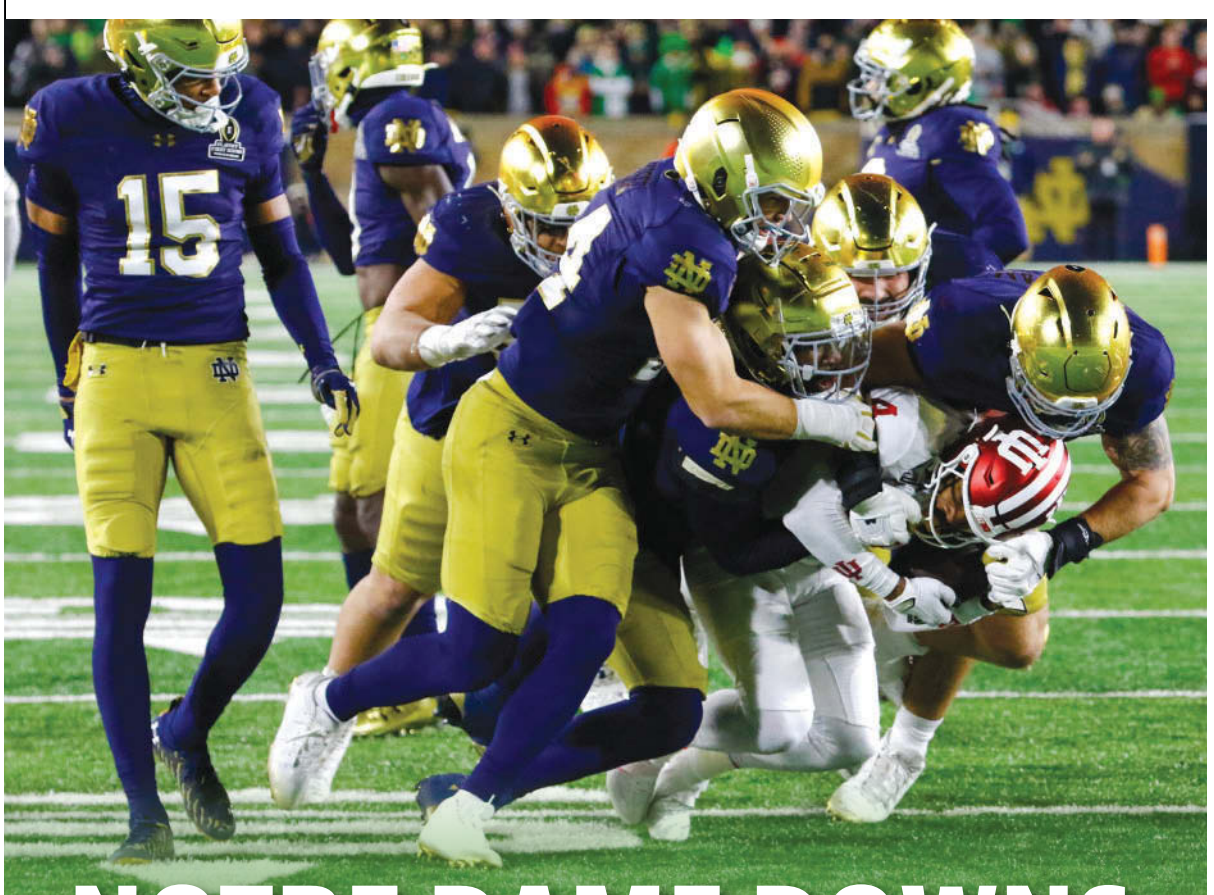
"Kristen has a passion for Michigan State University, Spartan volleyball and our entire community, and has first-hand experience with success at MSU both as a student-athlete and a coach. As a player, her work ethic, volleyball IQ, and team-first attitude helped her excel on the court, and those same qualities will be equally impactful as she mentors her student-athletes. She's an excellent recruiter who has strong relationships with volleyball clubs throughout Michigan and the surrounding states. I'm excited to watch her grow as a head coach and pour her heart and soul into building a successful Spartan volleyball program."

At Minnesota, Kelsay worked with the setters and led recruiting efforts for the Golden Gophers. In 2024, Kelsay helped Minnesota to its 10th consecutive NCAA Tournament appearance and regular-season Top 10 victories over then No. 1-ranked Texas and No. 7-ranked Wisconsin. Setter Melani Shaffmaster was named First Team All-Big Ten, AVCA All-Region and was

See KELSAY, Page B2

SUBMITTED | LEADER PUBLICATIONS

FOOTBALL



NOTRE DAME DOWNS INDIANA 27-17 IN CFP OPENER

By MAXWELL HARDEN
max.harden@leaderpub.com

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — The University of Notre Dame football team (12-1) became the first college football program to earn a College Football Playoff victory on its home field with a 27-17 victory over Indiana (11-2) in Notre Dame Stadium on Friday, Dec. 20

Notre Dame controlled the game from the start to the finish, holding Indiana to three points in the first half, 63 total rush yards and built a 27-3 lead before the Hoosiers tacked on points late in the fourth quarter after the game was decided.

"You had a lot of good from all three phases tonight, and you've seen that throughout the

Season," said head coach Marcus Freeman. "No one phase was perfect, and that's what we strive for is perfection. No one phase was perfect. But what happens is when one's phase isn't getting the job done, another phase picks it up, and we'll need that as we continue to move throughout these playoffs.

That's what it's going to take to achieve the goals that we aspire to have. It's not going to be offensive, defense or special teams, it's going to be all three phases playing complementary football."

Two of the Fighting Irish playmakers stepped up when Notre Dame needed it most. Senior Consensus All-American safety Xavier Watts snuffed out a scoring opportunity for IU with an interception and on the next play, Jeremiyah Love took off for a 98-yard touchdown run.

"Huge," said Notre Dame Coach Marcus Freeman. "Backed-up situation. We just threw an interception the drive before, and it was 0-0 at that time. Just threw an interception, we get an interception on defense, and that first play to go 98 yards was huge just for everybody. Yes, the offense, but the overall confidence of our team. To go up 7-0 with that type of touchdown. We know he's not 100 percent. We're just going to keep getting him healthy. But he showed on that play whatever percent he is, once he breaks through that third level, it's hard to catch Jeremiyah Love."

Irish signal caller Riley Leonard was 22-for-32 in the contest for 201 yards, one passing touchdown and one rushing touchdown. He connected with Jordan Faison for seven passes for 89 yards.

Kurtis Rourke completed 20 of 33 passes for 215 yards, two touchdowns and one interception and Myles Price had five catches for 56 yards and one touchdown while Elijah Sarrett had four catches for 67 yards. Omar Cooper had one catch for 23 yards. On defense, Jailin Walker and Aiden Fisher had 10 tackles apiece and James Carpenter had seven tackles and one sack.

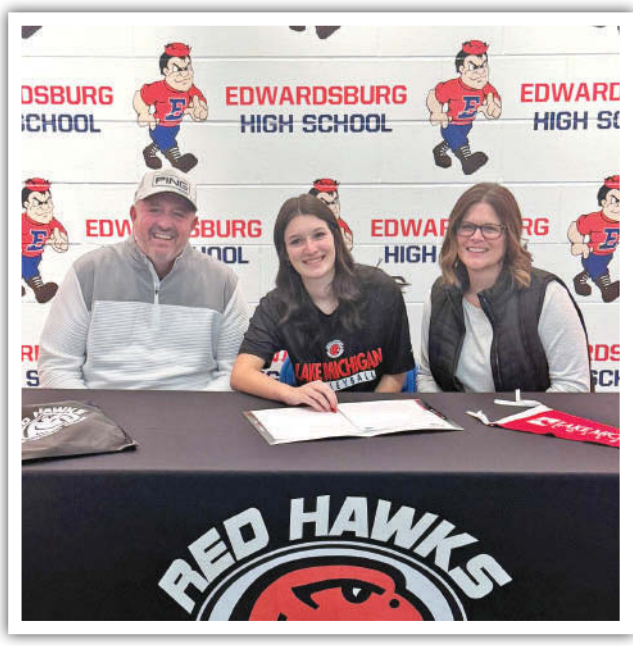
"All good things come to an end," said Indiana Head Coach Curt Cignetti. "And when you're my age, you've seen it all. And I have a lot of guys hurting in there but a part of life is learning how to deal with disappointment the proper way and come back a stronger person because of the experience. You

See OPENER, Page B3

AMELLIO RODRIGUEZ | LEADER PUBLICATIONS CONTRIBUTOR

VOLLEYBALL

EDWARDSBURG'S GRAZIANI SIGNS WITH LMC VOLLEYBALL



SUBMITTED | LEADER PUBLICATIONS

Edwardsburg's Mia Graziani has signed with Lake Michigan College volleyball. "Mia is a well-trained player with good ball control and a great arm swing," the team said in a statement. "She places the ball well and knows how to score points. She will add tremendous depth to our team."

Bonner picks SMC volleyball

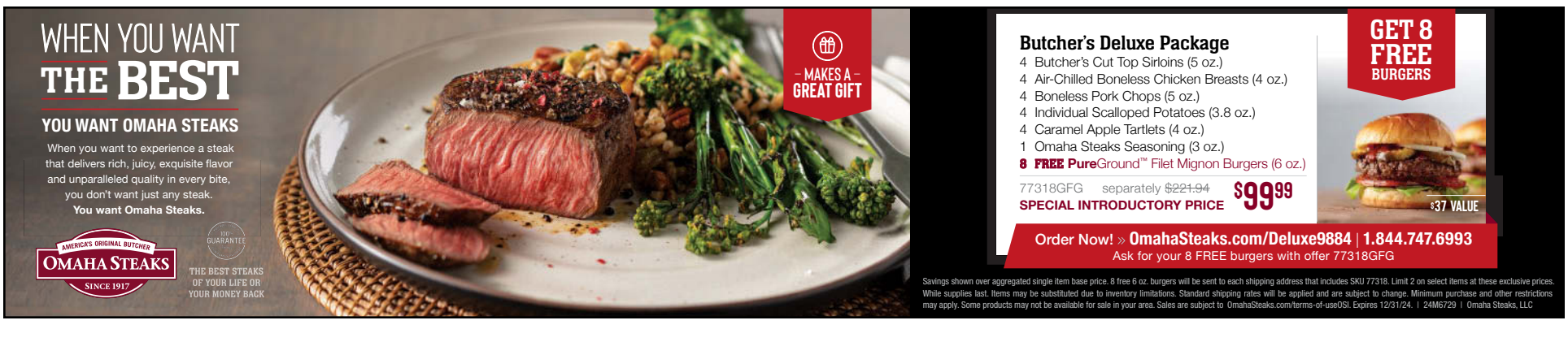
COMMUNITY REPORT

DOWAGIAC — Ashanti Bonner of Elkhart High School and NIVA Volleyball Club has signed her NJCAA Letter of Intent to play volleyball in the 1st Source Bank Fieldhouse for Head Coach Jenny Nate and the Roadrunners.

"Ashanti is a strong, aggressive middle hitter, blocker and outside hitter who can put the ball away," Nate said. "She is able to run a fast tempo attack from both positions and will be a lethal offensive player for us. She is an incredible teammate who displays outstanding energy on the court and led her team in both blocks and kill efficiency. Ashanti not only comes from a tough high school program but also from NIVA Volleyball Club where she gained high-level experience. We are excited to welcome her to the SMC Volleyball Team and look forward to seeing her become a strong force for us on the net."

"You will love watching Ashanti," added Elkhart Varsity Head Coach Jacqueline Rost. "She is a high-character player with a phenomenal work ethic and willingness to learn. She has natural athletic ability, particularly in her vertical jump. Though she is a somewhat undersized middle attacker and blocker by traditional standards, her jump more than makes

See BONNER, Page B3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Champs once again

Ferris State downs Valdosta State 49-14 to win D2 National Championship

COMMUNITY REPORT

BIG RAPIDS — The Ferris State University Bulldogs captured their third NCAA Division II National Championship in the last four years with a dominating 49-14 win over Valdosta State (Ga.) in the title game on Saturday (Dec. 21) at the McKinney ISD Stadium in McKinney, Texas.

The Bulldogs built a 14-0 first-quarter lead and led 28-7 at halftime en route to the triumph, closing the year with 14 consecutive wins and a 14-1 overall record.

The title came in the Bulldogs's fourth NCAA D2 National Championship game appearance in the last six years and was the program's third following back-to-back crowns in 2021 and 2022.

"Wow, what an amazing feeling and accomplishment for our guys," said FSU head coach Tony Annese. "These guys mean so much to me and it's awesome to see the jubilation they have following an outcome like this. We're so appreciative of all the support we have received from our administration to our alumni and our fans. It was an awesome year."

Ferris State rolled up 465 yards of total offense in the win, including 251 on the ground and 214 in the air.

The Bulldogs jumped in front first as the offensive unit took its opening possession and moved 81 yards in nine plays before junior quarterback Trinidad Chambliss found the end zone on a one-yard TD run.

FSU then came back and moved 76 yards in only three plays with junior slot receiver Brady Rose hooking up with wideout Cam Underwood on a 61-yard scoring throw to make it 14-0 with 3:51 left in the opening stanza.

The Bulldogs pushed the margin to 21-0 on tailback Kannon Katzer's 30-yard scoring reception from Chambliss to start the second frame. His score came on a drive that covered 67 yards in only four plays.

Valdosta State got on the board with 1:49 left in the half on a 38-yard TD throw from quarterback Sammy Edwards, but FSU responded with an 11-play, 72-yard drive to answer with a 32-yard scoring throw from Chambliss to senior slot receiver Emari O'Brien with only 10 seconds left in the half.

In the third quarter, FSU took the second half kickoff and moved 63 yards in eight plays to increase the lead to 35-7 on a five-yard touchdown run from Chambliss.

After VSU trimmed the lead to 35-14 midway thru the third period, the Bulldog defense came up with a score as defensive end Tyrone Fowler raced 16 yards to the endzone on a scoop and score, giving Ferris State a 42-14 edge at the end of three periods.

The Bulldogs later added a nine-yard scoring throw from Chambliss to Underwood with 13:41 to go in the game to cap the scoring. That last FSU scoring drive covered 65 yards in eight plays.

Chambliss led the Bulldog attack with 11-of-20 passing for 153 yards and three scores. Rose completed two-of-two passes for 64 yards and a touchdown. On the ground, Katzer ran for 97 yards on 14 carries while Chambliss rushed for 78 yards and two scores on 13 attempts. Underwood led FSU in the receiving game with three catches for 86 yards and two touchdowns while O'Brien hauled in two passes for 48 yards and a score.

SUBMITTED | LEADER PUBLICATIONS

The Bulldog defense limited Valdosta State to 311 total yards, including 121 on the ground and 190 in the air. Junior linebacker Sefa Saipaia paced FSU with eight tackles while Gyasi Mattison finished with seven stops.

Valdosta State closed the year with a 13-1 overall record following their only setback of the season in the title game, which was the third national championship matchup between the two programs since 2018.

The Bulldogs finished the 2024 season as the GLIAC Champions, Super Region Three Champions and the NCAA Division II National Champions.

Senior and former Cassopolis standout Tyrese Hunt-Thompson earned his third national championship as a member of the Bulldogs.

Freeman named finalist for 2024 George Munger College Coach of the Year Award

COMMUNITY REPORT

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — Garnering his third finalist honor for national coaching awards, Dick Corbett Head Football Coach Marcus Freeman has been named a finalist for the 2024 George Munger College Coach of the Year Award, presented by the Maxwell Football Club.

The winner of the 2024 George Munger Award will be announced on Thursday Jan. 9, 2025. Notre Dame has had one previous winner of the award: Tyrone Willingham in 2002.

Freeman, also a finalist for the Dodd Trophy and the Eddie Robinson Coach of the Year Award, is in his third season at Notre Dame and has led the Irish to a 12-1 record in 2024, including a First-Round playoff win over Indiana, with a No. 3 ranking in the Associated Press (AP) and Coaches Polls, and the No. 7 seed in the 2024 College Football Playoff.

The Irish, currently on an 11-game win streak, move on in the College Football Playoff to face No. 2 Georgia in the Allstate Sugar Bowl on Jan. 1, 2025.

Freeman has led Notre Dame to five victories over opponents ranked in the AP Poll at the time of the game this season: No. 20 Texas A&M, No. 15 Louisville, No. 24 Navy, No. 18 Army and No. 9 Indiana. The CFP victory over Indiana was the 12th ranked win of the Freeman era at Notre Dame, more than any other Irish head coach in the first three years of his tenure.

Through the regular season and the first round of the playoffs, Notre Dame ranks among the top teams in the nation in multiple statistical categories, including: first in team passing efficiency defense (96.94), first in turnovers gained (29), first in defensive touchdowns (6), third in scoring defense (13.8), third in turnover margin (1.23), fourth in scoring offense (38.8), fourth in passing yards allowed (162.3), fourth in interceptions (18), fifth in fourth-down success rate (0.760), seventh in third down defense (0.308), seventh in fourth down defense (0.361), eighth in total defense (295.3), ninth in fumbles recovered (11), ninth in red zone defense (0.727), 10th in passes had intercepted (6) and 11th in rushing offense (222.4).

KELSAY

Continued from page B1

an AVCA All-America Honorable Mention under Kelsay's coaching. Her 2025 recruiting class was ranked by multiple sites as a top-10 class nationally.

"I am honored to return to Michigan State University as our women's volleyball head coach," said Kelsay. "This program has shaped my life in remarkable ways. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to President Kevin Guskiewicz, Athletic Director Alan Haller, and Executive Senior Associate AD Julee Burgess for this opportunity to return to the Spartan Family.

"I love this University and my passion for all things Green & White is unmatched. I look forward to meeting with the team and reconnecting with our loyal fans, alumni, and Spartan community. Go Green!"

Kelsay had two Big Ten coaching stops prior to Minnesota, serving as an assistant coach at Northwestern from 2019-21 and at Michigan State under former head coach Cathy George from 2015-18.

In 2022, she worked as the associate director and recruiting coordinator of Volleyball Club Nebraska where she was the lead coach for the U16 and U18 Elite teams. Kelsay also assisted with the USA National Team Development Program where she worked with the U15/U16 age group.

As an assistant at MSU, Kelsay helped the team to a four-year record of 85-48 along with an Elite Eight appearance in 2017, the first regional finals appearance for the Spartans since 1996. Kelsay coached Michigan State's all-time assist leader and two-time All-American, Rachel Minarick.

A two-time team captain while wearing the Green & White from 2010-13, Kelsay ranks fourth in program history in sets played (473) and seventh in career assists (3,040). Kelsay set the Spartans to back-to-back Sweet 16 appearances in 2012 and 2013. Following her senior campaign, Kelsay was awarded Michigan State Athletics' Chester Brewer Leadership Award and the Dr. James Feurig Achievement and Service Award. Kelsay also earned CoSIDA Academic All-America honors and was a three-time Big Ten Distinguished Scholar and Academic All-Big Ten selection.

After her graduation from MSU, Kelsay was awarded a Big Ten Postgraduate Scholarship and served as a graduate assistant in MSU's Student-Athlete Support Services department where she served as an academic counselor and helped oversee the department's community outreach initiatives.

Originally from Wheaton, Illinois, Kelsay graduated from Michigan State with a bachelor's degree in psychology and obtained a master's in sports administration from Northwestern.

DAILY DATA

HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS BASKETBALL

BRANDYWINE 56, BENTON HARBOR 10
At Benton Harbor
BRANDYWINE (56): Adeline Gill 6, Karleigh Byrd 3, Adelyn Drotoz 15, Ireland Prenkert 0, Mackenna Price 5, Lily Gill 6, Lexi Troup 14, Paige Krisler 3, Miley Young 2, Niyah Mason 2. Totals 19 7-12 56.
BENTON HARBOR (10): Zakiera Baxter 5, Leona Thompson 0, Lovely Douglass 1, Kandis Moore 1, Javis Smith 3. Totals 2 5-10 10.
Brandywine 23 45 56 56
Benton Harbor 1 7 7 10
3-point baskets: Brandywine 11 (Drotoz 5, Troup 4, Krisler 1, Price 1), Benton Harbor 1 (Baxter 1). Total fouls: Brandywine 11, Benton Harbor 11. Records: Brandywine 5-0 (3-0 Lakeland Conference), Benton Harbor 0-3 (0-2 Lakeland Conference).

PAW PAW 71, NILES 53
At Niles
Paw Paw (71): Eva Charron 1, Grace Mitchell 12, Ruby Schincariol 2, Carlie Streich 2, Stella Shaefer 16, A.J. Rickli 29, Kailey Nichols 2, Mackenzie Allen 7. Totals 27 12-22 71.
NILES (53): Jessie Thornton 16, Tanaya Brown 12, Qianna Ball 11, Maddie Zache 0, Kayla Kiggins 0, Mia Holmes 6, Ari Gerrits 8. Totals 21 5-9 53.
Paw Paw 23 42 60 71
Niles 9 21 38 53
3-point baskets: Paw Paw 5 (Shaefer 3, Mitchell 2), Niles 6 (Ball 3, Holmes 2, Thornton 1). Total fouls (fouled out): Paw Paw 12, Niles 19 (Holmes). Records: Paw Paw 5-1 (3-1 Wolverine Conference), Niles 1-4 (0-4 Wolverine Conference).

CASSOPOLIS 67, COMSTOCK 25
At Cassopolis
COMSTOCK (25): Jordan Rouse 0, Trinity Hagenbuch 5, Kylie Brett 2, Roven Hagenbuch 13, Kamario Hughes 1, Aaleyiah Reese 4. Totals 8 8-27 25.
CASSOPOLIS (67): Mackenzie Boyer 12, Jamayla Franklin 6, JaMya Hart 3, Aleah Dahlgren 3, Madalynn Yakel 10, Cheyenne Remond 7, Madison Nelson 12, Ryley Bowsher 14. Totals 25 12-23 67.
Comstock 3 12 17 25
Cassopolis 20 31 49 67
3-point baskets: Comstock 1 (T. Hagenbuch 1), Cassopolis 5 (Boyer 3, Redmond 1, Bowsher 1). Total fouls: Comstock 22, Cassopolis 19. Records: Comstock 0-5 (0-3 Southwest 10), Cassopolis 2-2 (2-1 Southwest 10).

EDWARDSBURG 52, STURGIS 35
At Sturgis
EDWARDSBURG (52): Shelby Laubach 8, Ella Zache 16, Maddie Pobuda 17, Mya Eberlein 6, Kya Shier 5. Totals 19 6-10 52.
STURGIS (35): Angela Cary 3, Addison Eicher 1, Kylie Brooks 2, Madison Webb 9, Kennedy Finnerman 4, Sydney Bir 4, Kenzie Richer 2, Gora Phillips 10. Totals 10 12-18 35
Edwardsburg 14 29 39 52
Sturgis 5 15 28 35
3-point baskets: Edwardsburg 6 (Pobuda 5, Zache 1), Sturgis 3 (Phillips 2, Bir 1. Total fouls (fouled out): Edwardsburg 16 (Eberlein), Sturgis 12. Records: Edwardsburg 4-2 (3-1 Wolverine Conference), Sturgis 3-3 (1-3 Wolverine Conference).

BERRIEN SPRINGS 46, DOWAGIAC 26
At Berrien Springs
DOWAGIAC (26): Claire Hess 4, Marlie Carpenter 16, Evie Lock 5, Olivia McIntosh 1, Shamyra Clark 0. Totals 8 9-17 26.
BERRIEN SPRINGS (46): Zion Ellis 21, Addison Frakes 1, Aubre Smith 12, Uriah Andriantsoa 2, Lillian Weigand 3, Adeline Weber 5, Hindra Pawa 2. Totals 20 4-11 46.
Dowagiac 10 12 18 26
Berrien Springs 10 14 32 46
3-point baskets: Dowagiac 1 (Lock 1), Berrien Springs 2 (Weber 1, Ellis 1). Total fouls: Dowagiac 14, 14. Records: Dowagiac (2-4 (1-2 Lakeland Conference), Berrien Springs 4-0 (2-0 Lakeland Conference).

HIGH SCHOOL BOYS BASKETBALL

NILES 65, PAW PAW 61
At Paw Paw
NILES (65): Quinton King Jr. 0, Brayden Favors 22, Andre Wells Jr. 22, Derek Hill Jr. 12, Donovyn Williams 5, Ceon Kirtdoll 3. Totals 24 10-17 64.
PAW PAW (61): Elias Sonnenberg 2, Truman Brennan 22, Barron Marinich 13, Kaelien Tate 6, Caden Bowen 14, Ayden Roth 4, Ryan Holmes 0. Totals 26 4-6 61.
Niles 21 37 49 65
Paw Paw 9 19 36 61
3-point baskets: Niles 6 (Hill Jr. 4, Wells Jr. 1, Kirtdoll 1), Paw Paw 5 (Brennan 3, Bowen 2). Total fouls (fouled out): Niles 9, Paw Paw 20 (Sonnenberg, Holmes, Tate). Records: Niles 4-3 (4-1 Wolverine Conference), Paw Paw 5-1 (3-1 Wolverine Conference).

BENTON HARBOR 74, BRANDYWINE 69
At Benton Harbor
BRANDYWINE (69): Nylen Goins 19, Elijha Burt 9, Will Hubbard 10, Mason Michelin 5, Ryder Richard 22, Emerson Gogley 2, Jordan Hester 2 Totals 25 13-22 69.
BENTON HARBOR (74): Latrell Johnson 6, Jkwon Lewis 30, A. Lewis 1, Desean Mathison 8, Myron Rice 14, Torey Wilson 2, Montell Hobbs 9, DaCorey McKinney 2, D. Wilson 2. Totals 29 8-10 74.
Brandywine 8 28 45 69
Benton Harbor 21 44 63 74
3-point baskets: Brandywine 6 (Richard 4, Burt 1, Michelin 1), Benton Harbor 8 (Lewis 4, Hobbs 3, Rice 1). Total fouls (fouled out): Brandywine 12, Benton Harbor 18 (Mathison). Records: Brandywine 3-3 (2-1 Lakeland Conference), Benton Harbor 5-0 (2-0 Lakeland Conference).

BERRIEN SPRINGS 62, DOWAGIAC 58
At Dowagiac
BERRIEN SPRINGS (62): Joe Chimwomcheye 3, Brady Blasko 19, Ethan McCrary 9, Micah McFarland 6, J.J. Frakes 20, Brody Brewer 7. Totals 18 17-20 62.
DOWAGIAC (58): Jamal Williams 3, Lamone Moore Jr. 14, Braylon Wade 4, Isaiah Fitchett 18, Caleb Smith 3, Brayden Diaz 12, Artie Ruiz 1, Chase Frazier 3. Totals 18 18 25 58.
Berrien Springs 8 20 43 62
Dowagiac 7 30 39 58
3-point baskets: Berrien Springs 9 (Blasko 4, McCrary 3, Brewer 1, Chimwomcheye 1), Dowagiac 4 (Fitchett 2, Moore Jr. 2). Total fouls (fouled out): Berrien Springs 14, Dowagiac 23 (Williams, Frazier). Records: Berrien Springs 4-2 (2-0 Lakeland Conference), Dowagiac 0-8 (0-3 Lakeland Conference).

EDWARDSBURG 53, STURGIS 27
At Edwardsburg
STURGIS (27): Carson Eicher 9, Lukis Bir 8, Gavyn Moore 3, Wyatt Miller 2, Dawson Miller 5. Totals 11 3-6 27.
EDWARDSBURG (53): Joe Shively 5, Brody Schimpa 21, Maverick Gates 2, Blaise Crist 5, Michael Wright 3, Reed Gates 9, Matt Anders 8. Totals 22 3-4 53.
Sturgis 6 15 23 27
Edwardsburg 9 19 32 53
3-point baskets: Sturgis 2 (Eicher 1, Moore 1), Edwardsburg 6 (Schimpa 3, R. Gates 1, Wright 1, Shively 1). Total fouls: Sturgis 11, Edwardsburg 7. Records: Sturgis 2-5 (0-4 Wolverine Conference), Edwardsburg 6-1 (3-1 Wolverine Conference).

MISHAWAKA MARIAN 72, NILES 50
Saturday, Dec. 21 At Portage, Michiana Shootout
MARIAN (72): Paxan Sullivan 10, Brandon Foster 11, William Owens 23, Calvin Bailey 5, Prescott Horvath 15, Braxton Brooks 4, Joaquin Wilson 2, Freddie Williams 2. Totals 29 10-13 72.
NILES (50): Quinton King Jr. 6, Brayden Favors 21, Andre Wells Jr. 13, Ceon Kirtdoll 3, Derek Hill Jr. 0, Liam Pesce 1, Donovyn Williams 6. Totals 20 3-6 50.
Marian 19 42 56 72
Niles 8 23 37 50
3-point baskets: Marian 4 (Sullivan 2, Foster 1, Bailey 1), Niles 7 (Favors 3, King Jr. 2, Wells Jr. 1, Kirtdoll 1). Total fouls: Marian 11, Niles 8. Records: Marian 5-2, Niles 4-4

GIRLS STANDINGS

WOLVERINE		
Vicksburg	4-0	6-0
Paw Paw	3-1	5-1
Edwardsburg	3-1	5-2
Otsego	3-1	3-3
Sturgis	1-3	3-3
T. Rivers	1-3	1-4
Plainwell	1-3	1-5
Niles	0-4	1-4
LAKELAND		
Brandywine	3-0	5-0
B. Springs	2-0	4-0
Dowagiac	1-2	2-4
Buchanan	0-2	3-4
B. Harbor	0-2	0-3
SOUTHWEST 10		
Centreville	3-0	3-1
W. Pigeon	3-0	4-2
Lawrence	2-1	4-1
Decatur	2-1	3-2
Cassopolis	2-1	2-2
Marcellus	2-1	2-2
Bl'mingdale	1-2	1-5
Comstock	0-3	0-5
Bangor	0-3	2-3
Hartford	0-3	0-5

SCORING LEADERS

Name	Games	PTS	AVG
Jessica Thornton, Niles	5	71	14.2
Marlie Carpenter, Dowa.	6	81	13.5
Maddie Pobuda, Edward.	7	84	12.0
Alyssa Carson, Buch.	7	83	11.8
Adeline Gill, Bran.	5	59	11.8
Adelyn Drotoz, Bran.	5	52	10.4

BOYS STANDINGS

WOLVERINE		
Niles	4-1	4-4
Paw Paw	3-1	6-1
Edwardsburg	3-1	6-1
Plainwell	3-1	4-1
Otsego	2-3	3-3
Vicksburg	2-3	3-5
T. Rivers	1-4	2-5
Sturgis	0-4	2-5
LAKELAND		
B. Harbor	2-0	5-1
B. Springs	2-0	5-2
Brandywine	2-1	3-3
Buchanan	0-2	4-3
Dowagiac	0-3	0-8
SOUTHWEST 10		
Hartford	5-0	6-0
Centreville	4-0	4-0
Cassopolis	3-1	4-2
W. Pigeon	3-1	3-2
Marcellus	2-2	2-3
Comstock	2-2	2-4
Bl'mingdale	1-3	3-4
Bangor	1-3	1-4
Decatur	0-4	0-6
Lawrence	0-5	0-6

SCORING LEADERS

Name	Games	PTS	AVG
Lucas Williams, Cass	6	120	20.0
Karmine Brown, Buch.	7	124	17.7
Braylen Favors, Niles	8	140	17.5
Isaiah Fitchett, Dowa.	8	139	17.4
Brody Schimpa, Edwards.	7	114	16.3
Brenden Olsen, Niles	4	65	16.3
Nylen Goins, Bran.	6	95	15.8
Ryder Richard, Bran.	6	91	15.2
Andre Wells Jr., Niles	7	104	14.9

AMELLIO RODRIGUEZ | LEADER PUBLICATIONS CONTRIBUTOR

OPENER

Continued from page B1

never get everything you want in life. That's how life is.

But it doesn't diminish what these guys accomplished, for sure this season which everyone in this room can detail out what this team's accomplished. A lot of firsts. So proud of them. It's easy to say we didn't play our best game, but a lot of that was probably because of who we

played. I thought Riley Leonard was excellent handling the pressure, getting rid of the ball."

Notre Dame will advance to face the No. 2 seed in the College Football Playoff, Georgia, in the 2025 Sugar Bowl on January 1st in New Orleans. The Fighting Irish will be without the services of senior defensive lineman Rylie Mills, who is out for the remainder of the season with a knee injury,

"It speaks volumes about this football program, about our players, coaching staff and everybody involved and the work they put in," Freeman said. "Continue to do that. Everybody knows it's a big game coming up, but the approach, the preparation must continue to have some consistency in what we've done, but there's gotta be a little bit of elevation. As I say, every single week, we have to do it a little bit better."

BONNER

Continued from page B1

up for that, as does her desire and drive to improve. She is such an easy athlete to coach because she listens and makes every effort to make the adjustments necessary for growth. She also always has a smile on her face. It brought tremendous joy to her coaches and teammates as the season went on to see some of the amazing attacks...timing was great, jump was unbelievable, and she really started attacking with some power. The improvement she's made for us in two seasons at the varsity level has just been awesome to witness. One of her best matches for us this season was against South Central (at the Mishawaka Invitational) where she hit .665 and had 4 assisted blocks."

Bonner is the sixth member of the 2025 SMC Volleyball class, joining Purdue Northwest transfer Amie Schutz of Valparaiso, Sophia Bachman and Isabella Tibbles of Buchanan, Randi Taylor of Lakeshore and Meah Evans of Constantine as new players on the Roadrunners squad.

SMC Volleyball finished the 2024 season with a winning record of 22-16, including a win over the previously undefeated and nationally-ranked McHenry County Scots. The Roadrunners were 7-5 in the MCCAA Western Conference, qualifying for the Great Lakes District Tournament for the third consecutive year, advancing in the bracket twice. Individual Roadrunners earned seven conference and regional awards, including All-Freshman Team, All-Conference Honorable Mention, All-Conference Second Team, All-Conference First Team, All-MCCAA Team and All-Region Team.

SUBMITTED | LEADER PUBLICATIONS

Corewell Health Foundation Southwest Michigan presents Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber (SMRC) with a $50,000 check for the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber Foundation. Front row L to R: Soroya Pierre-VanArtesen, Olivia Starks, Arthur Havlicek, Christine Vanlandingham, Natalie Baggio, RN, President & COO Corewell Health South. Back Row L to R: Molly McFadden, Leanne Brownfield, Jasmine Hansen, Ron Sorce, Dr. James Gendernalik, Sarah Spoonholtz.

Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber Awarded $60,000 from Corewell Health Foundation Southwest Michigan

COMMUNITY REPORT

ST. JOSEPH — The Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber is proud to announce it has been awarded a total of $60,000 from the Corewell Health Foundation Southwest Michigan to support two of its 501(c)3 subsidiaries, the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber Foundation and Discover Southwest Michigan.

The award will help strengthen the Chamber's overall efforts to foster economic growth, attract and retain talent, and address critical community needs across Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties.

"On behalf of our board and our members, we are greatly appreciative of Corewell Health Foundation's generous investment in our mission," said Arthur Havlicek, President & CEO of the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber. "This funding will enable us to deploy impactful programming across the community, with the goal of increasing prosperity and population throughout Southwest Michigan."

$50,000 was awarded to the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber Foundation to support programming across the Chamber's four pillars of service: Leadership Development, Business Development, Community Development, and Economic Development.

$10,000 was awarded to Discover Southwest Michigan, the Chamber's initiative aimed at increasing population growth by showcasing Southwest Michigan as an ideal place to live, work, and raise a family.

"Corewell Health is enthusiastic about backing the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber Foundation's efforts to advance leadership, economic growth, business, and community progress," said Soroya Pierre-VanArtsen, President of the Corewell Health Foundation Southwest Michigan & Vice President of Philanthropy for Corewell Health Lakeland Hospitals. "We are equally eager to support the Chamber's Discover Southwest Michigan initiative. We firmly believe that Discover Southwest Michigan will be a groundbreaking initiative to draw in talent, thereby expanding our workforce and community. A vibrant community functions as a dynamic system in which individuals feel a sense of belonging and support, and where their needs are fulfilled.

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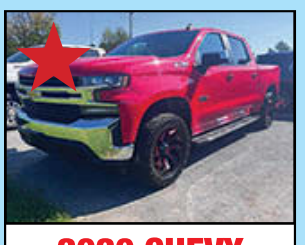

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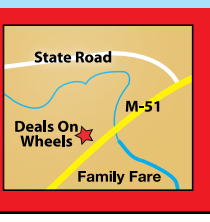

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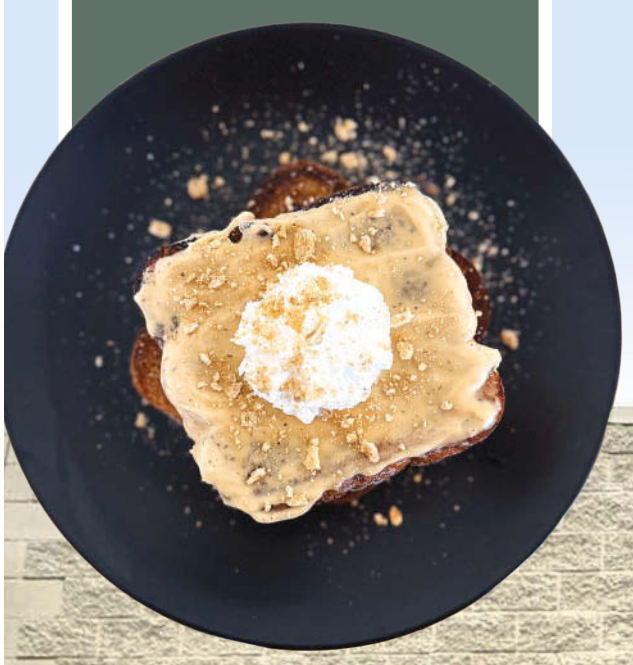
— Jake Arnold



BRUNCH ON BEESON

Brookie's Cafe to open in Dowagiac

BY MAXWELL HARDEN | LEADER PUBLICATIONS

DOWAGIAC — A new dining option will soon be opening in downtown Dowagiac.

Jake and Brooke Arnold of Jake's Restaurant Group are gearing up to open Brookie's Cafe, 105 Beeson St., Dowagiac, Thursday, Jan. 2. The brunch cafe will be open from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Saturday

As the owner of Happy Jake's and Arnie's in Dowagiac and Wakey Jakes in Marcellus, The Arnolds enjoy sharing their passion for food with Cass County residents. So when the opportunity came about to expand JRG into downtown Dowagiac – the former home of Beeson Street Bar and Grill, no less – Jake said they could not pass it up.

"When I posted the breakfast menu for Arnie's on Facebook, someone tagged a realtor in the area and said 'this guy should open up a place in the old Beeson Street Cafe,'" he said. "Matt Money and I got connected through that and he showed me the spot. I have been to downtown Dowagiac probably a hundred times – I'm here three or four times

See BRUNCH, Page C2

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Jake and Brooke Arnold of Jake's Restaurant Group are gearing up to open Brookie's Cafe, 105 Beeson St., Dowagiac, Thursday, Jan. 2.

Lincoln Township Public Library hosts reopening celebration

COMMUNITY REPORT

STEVENSVILLE — After an extensive renovation, the Lincoln Township Public Library officially reopened its doors Saturday, Dec. 14.

The ribbon cutting, hosted by the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber, welcomed the community back to the Library. Attendees will enjoy tours of the space's new improved accessibility, updated facilities, and modernized features, door prizes, face painting, and STEM activities for kids. Light refreshments will be provided.

"The reopening of the Lincoln Township Public Library represents more than just a renovation, but a revitalization of their commitment to education, community, and accessibility," says Arthur Havlicek, President & CEO of the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber. "During this extensive renovation, they've ensured the Library remains a place for learning, connection, and growth for everyone in our community, especially as it inspires future generations."

•Digital Lab with enhanced technology and resources to support digital literacy and creativity.

•A new fireplace and cozy coffee nook, providing a relaxing space for patrons to read, work, or connect with others in a comfortable, inviting atmosphere.

•Modern ADA-Compliant Wayfinding Signage to improve accessibility for all patrons.

"We at Pearson Construction are honored to have been part of the Lincoln Township Library's journey, first with the addition in 1997 and now with this transformative renovation. This reimagined space reflects the library team's inspiring vision and commitment to creating a community hub where knowledge, connection, and creativity can thrive for people of all ages for years to come," Burton Pearson II, President of Pearson Construction Company.

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Takuma Itoh – *Faded Aura.*

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BRUNCH

Continued from page C1

a week – and I've never seen this place. They showed me the space and I had the staff for it, so it kind of fell in my lap."

Arnold said the business owes its name to his wife and said that the restaurant will offer a variety of brunch options including skillets, omelettes, sandwiches, soups, paninis and more.

"The vibe of the place really describes who Brooke is," he said. "It's soft, elegant and elevated. There's no burgers, there's no deep fried anything; It's almost like a Panera or like McAlister's. You get your fresh soup, you've got your sandwiches. There's a really good breakfast – you still have your classics where you can get your omelets, your biscuits and gravy and eggs and potatoes. The goal and the vision is just to be a little bit elevated from a regular breakfast spot."

While there are breakfast options in and around Dowagiac, Arnold believes Brookie's will provide something new to the restaurant ecosystem. According to Arnold, more than 92,000 people on Facebook viewed his post announcing Brookie's Cafe.

"There's a couple of other places in town that do breakfast and I think based on what I've put out there on Facebook so far, I think people really like are drawn to it and are excited to have a cafe that does breakfast and lunch," he said.

According to Jake, JRG has rented out both the cafe and the space next door, which will be used for overflow seating for the cafe as well as a space to host events.

"We're gonna do wine and canvas, charcuterie classes, a worship night, cooking classes, things like that," he said. "We have a groom divider where we will have extra seating for the cafe."

As opening day approaches, Arnold is looking forward to welcoming the Dowagiac community to Brookie's Cafe.

"I've felt the love. I felt the love at Arnie's, for sure," he said. "Coming here, I think people are really excited and I believe in Dowagiac. I feel like there's going to be a revival in Dowagiac and we're excited to be a part of it."

St. Joe Winter Beer Fest returns in February

COMMUNITY REPORT

ST. JOSEPH — St. Joe Today invites everyone 21 years and older to come out of hibernation and meet up with friends during the 2025 St. Joe Winter Beer Fest.

The event takes place on Saturday, Feb. 1 from noon to 4 p.m. outdoors on the corner of Broad Street and Lake Boulevard in St. Joseph.

Ticket purchasers will have two ticket options again this year. A limited number of VIP tickets will be available (until 11:59 p.m. December 31) for $75 and will include admission, a tasting cup, 15 tokens (one token per sample), 30-minute early access to the event, a 2025 Winter Beer Fest long sleeve t-shirt, entertainment courtesy of Sunset Coast DJ and winter comradery. General Admission tickets will still be available for $40 and will include admission, a tasting cup, 12 tokens (one token per sample), entertainment courtesy of Sunset Coast DJ, and winter comradery. Festival attendees can order tickets online only at stjoetoday.com/beerfest.

Knapp expects that beer fans will be excited about the lineup of Michigan breweries planned for the festival. The 2024 event will feature twenty-one breweries and cideries. Breweries/cideries include but are not limited to Bell's Brewery, Blake's Hard Cider, Brew Detroit, Good Boy Vodka, Grand Armory Brewing Co., Haymarket Brewery, Lansing Brewing, Lazy Ballerina Winery (Hard Cider Only), New Belgium Brewing, North Pier Brewing Co., Peat's Cider, Petoskey Brewing, Right Brain Brewery, River Saint Joe Brewery, Round Barn Brewery, Saugatuck Brewing Co., Silver Harbor Brewing Co., Sister Lakes Brewing Co., The Livery, Upper Hand Brewery and Watermark Brewing Co.

For more information on the St. Joe Winter Beer Fest, visit stjoetoday.com/beerfest.

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Cornerstone Alliance breaks ground on Benton Harbor Waterfront Plaza

COMMUNITY REPORT

Cornerstone Alliance, Berrien County's premier economic development organization, broke ground Tuesday, Dec. 17 on the Benton Harbor Waterfront Plaza, marking a step forward in transforming the community's vision for accessible and vibrant waterfront spaces into reality.

The Benton Harbor Waterfront Plaza will connect the community to 600 feet of waterfront along Riverview Drive, offering new opportunities for recreation, relaxation, and engagement with the water. This transformative project represents a significant investment of more than $2 million to revitalize a one-acre site into a year-round hub of activity and connectivity.

The new plaza will feature amenities such as a water taxi dock, fishing area, fire pit, and shaded seating for food trucks. Designed to enhance both community connection and access to the water, the site will also serve as a space for future programming and events.

"Our community's future is tied to the water," said Mayor Marcus Muhammad, City of Benton Harbor. "This project is another important step forward in seizing the opportunity before us, and the best is yet to come."

The project is made possible through a $1 million grant from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation's (MEDC) Revitalization and Placemaking Program (RAP), matched by contributions from local partners, including a $25,000 commitment from the Benton Harbor City Commission and a significant donation from the Whirlpool Foundation. Harbor Shores, which donated the land for the project, will also oversee the plaza's ongoing maintenance.

"This project shows what can be realized when partners align. With the support from MEDC, City of Benton Harbor, Whirlpool, Harbor Shores, and Cornerstone Alliance, we were able to make this great community place a reality," said Andrew Haan, Vice President of Business Development at Cornerstone Alliance.

Sitework has begun, with completion in summer 2025. The redevelopment will address the challenges of the current site, including uneven terrain and limited access, to create a welcoming public space that supports leisure, recreation, and community gathering.

"The Plaza provides year-round opportunity to connect with the water," notes Chris Cook, Managing Director, Harbor Shores Community Redevelopment. "We look forward to providing a welcoming space programmed with opportunities for the entire community."

Cornerstone Alliance remains dedicated to creating economic and social impact in Southwestern Michigan through initiatives like the Benton Harbor Waterfront Plaza.

For more information about Cornerstone Alliance and its initiatives, please visit www.GoMichigan.com.

Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake coming to the LMC Mendel Center

COMMUNITY REPORT

BENTON HARBOR — European Royal Classical Ballet will bring Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake to Southwest Michigan for one performance only at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Jenkins Theatre in Benton Harbor at 3 p.m. Sunday, March 30. Tickets are on sale now for this newly added special engagement.

Swan Lake tells a timeless tale of romance and transformation. Set to Tchaikovsky's iconic and groundbreaking score, this poignant drama of true love and sacrifice captivates audiences to this day with its range of technically and emotionally challenging roles for both Principal dancers and the Corps de Ballet.

European Royal Classical Ballet is an expansion of Polski Ballet Królewski (The Polish Royal Ballet). After many years of successful performances and tours in Poland and throughout Europe, Polish Royal Ballet grew to include European Royal Classical Ballet. The creators and directors of ERCB are elated to unveil a production crafted with the finest artists and stagecraft from their European tours as they travel throughout the United States.

Tickets for this special engagement of European Royal Classical Ballet presents Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake at the LMC Mendel Center are on sale now at www.TheMendelCenter.com/events.

SOUTH BEND SYMPHONY TO PERFORM APPALACHIAN SPRING AT NOTRE DAME

Experience the timeless beauty of Copland's iconic masterpiece, "Appalachian Spring," as it vividly portrays the American landscape. Kojiro Uzmezaki joins the South Bend Symphony at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 12, as he uses the shakuhachi to transform the landscape imagined in Angel Lam's "Empty Mountain, Spirit Rain," and Takuma Itoh's "Faded Aura."

AJ's Uptown Relaunches as The Garage on Ferry Street

COMMUNITY REPORT

BERRIEN SPRINGS — After years of service to the community, AJ's Uptown Bar & Grill is embracing a bold new chapter in its rich history.

A special VIP Relaunch and rebrand of AJ's Uptown Bar & Grill to The Garage on Ferry Street was held Monday, Dec. 9. The event included a special VIP ribbon cutting celebration with the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber and a full public relaunch party.

Under new ownership since April of 2024, the name change represents a continued and evolving commitment to honor the long-standing legacy prior owners Roger and Lonna Johnson built within the Berrien Springs community, while carving out a new era for owners Rick Moreci and William Ranick. Complete with a fresh look and feel that ushers in a new era of entertainment, Moreci and Ranick have committed to maintaining the beloved traditions of great food and drinks that patrons have enjoyed for years.

"The Garage on Ferry Street is more than just a new name—it's a fresh start that reflects our evolving identity," said Moreci. "We're excited to continue offering the same great service our customers know and love, with even more to look forward to. New name, new entertainment, same great atmosphere!"

Guests can enjoy a newly reimagined menu featuring new dishes, an all-new specialty cocktail menu, new entertainment options – including a Pool Table and Darts – Movie Night Mondays, Trivia Tuesdays, Musical Bingo Thursdays and a fresh revamp of its Karaoke on Saturdays.

"We are most excited about the many possibilities this new name will bring. While we're updating our menu and offering fresh entertainment, we're staying true to the core values of both Wolf's Prairie and AJ's Uptown, two beloved pillars of the Berrien Springs community," added Moreci.

IUSB's Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship hosts wall-breaking event

COMMUNITY REPORT

Enthusiasm and hammers were the theme as Chancellor Elrod, Modupe Adeoye, inaugural director of the Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Indiana University South Bend, other staff and members of the campus community celebrated the start of construction on the Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship's new space in Northside Hall.

The Center will occupy space in Northside that formerly housed the Hammes Bookstore. With its new occupant comes a new look as well. To kick off the remodeling project with style, Chancellor Elrod and her colleagues literally smashed through one of the drywall panels in the room.

Rob DeCleene, Vice Chancellor for University Relations and Advancement, said that in the last couple of years of attending summits and conferences, he has been struck by "the convergence of higher education and economic development, and the discovery of how much of that world relies on innovation and entrepreneurship. This space will empower our students to join in driving that ecosystem, growing our community and our region every day."

DeCleene saluted the efforts of the team behind the project, including several local and university consultants and architects. Chancellor Elrod also emphasized how many people contributed time, expertise, and energy to transform the center from a concept into a reality.

"I've been working towards a Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship since the very beginning of my chancellorship five and a half years ago," she said. "It's been a labor of dedication, creativity, and community engagement which makes today even more special. We're committed to our students' personal and professional growth through the offering of high-impact practices, and the kind of engagement that will occur in this center definitely embodies that approach."

The Chancellor said that the Center will be a lively place for informal networking, collaboration and workshops while also providing physical space for storefronts and student startup spaces.

"There's already a tremendous entrepreneurial ecosystem in our community, and we're looking forward to connecting our students to all the opportunities that this region offers," Elrod said. "Another thing that's exciting about this center is that it offers opportunities to all our students, no matter what their major, to help them launch their ideas and their businesses in this region."

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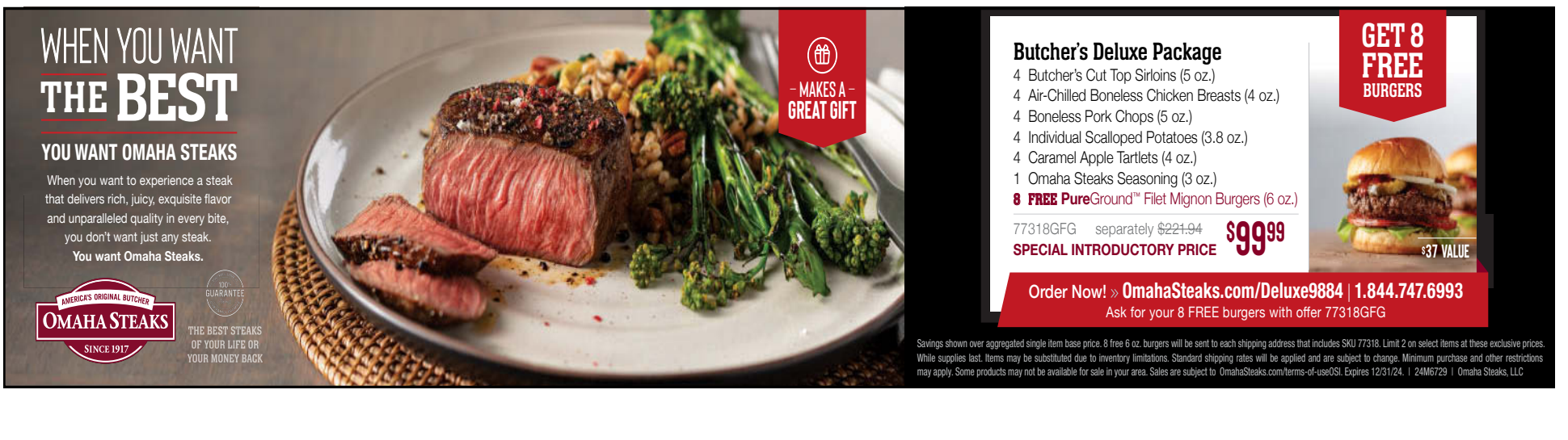
>
> **— Chancellor Elrod, Modupe Adeoye**

Adeoye said she is eager to implement the many projects already in the works, and she stressed the value of the new Entrepreneurship Certificate Program, which equips students with essential training, mentorships, and resources. She also praised the first recruits of the Center's student ambassadors cohort, called the Titans of Innovation.

"The Titans of Innovation are at the vanguard, preaching the gospel of entrepreneurship and innovation to the student body," Adeoye said.

Joshua King, one of the inaugural student Titans of Innovation, spoke of the positive impact his involvement with the Center has already had on his studies and his professional outlook.

To find out more about the Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, visit southbend.iu.edu/cie.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MAXWELL HARDEN | LEADER PUBLICATIONS

Niles' Danny Bloss has participated in the Hunter Ice Festival since its inception 20 years ago.

ANNUAL HUNTER ICE FESTIVAL RETURNS TO NILES IN JANUARY

By MAXWELL HARDEN
max.harden@leaderpub.com

NILES — One of the Niles community's most popular events is set to take shape in a few weeks

The 21st annual Hunter Ice Festival will take place from Friday, Jan. 17 to Sunday, Jan. 19 in Niles' downtown area. The annual event is free and open to the public. Six expertly carved ice sculptures from prominent artists will be placed around the downtown for people to view. The Festival is sponsored by the Niles Downtown Development Authority Main Street, directed by the organization's promotion committee and underwritten by the Hunter Foundation. The goals of the festival are to encourage commercial activity in the downtown area and tell the history of the Hunter Family and their ice carvings and ice cream. Activities will include ice carving competition, chili crawl, ice games and sledding. The 15th annual Frigid 5K Run will take place the morning of Saturday, Jan. 18.

Ice Sculptures and competitions will be taking place from the NW corner of 5th and Main to Riverfront Park including the Amphitheater and between Cedar and Sycamore Streets

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